Shen Yuan's Guide to Surviving an Otome Game

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Shen Yuan's Guide to Surviving an Otome Game

by chiwuri

Summary

During one of his habitual stays at the hospital, Shen Yuan decides to kill some time by playing PIDW's first game release, Proud Immortal Demon Romance — a mobile otome game that focuses on romancing the male characters. Hoping from the bottom of his soul that Airplane put tons of never-seen lore in the game, Shen Yuan immediately starts playing the Cang Qiong Peak Lord's route, which takes place during their disciple years. After playing hours into the night, Shen Yuan goes to sleep with a migraine and a shamefully big charge in his credit card.

What Shen Yuan doesn't expect is to wake up as his in-game character with a System that demands he finish the game if he wishes to return home.

Notes

hello! so, i got this idea at like 2am on a random tuesday and i just. had to write it!! love me some otome games with stupid plots and mary sue characters <3
i hope you guys like it <33
twt and bluesky: shiyooji

Chapter 1: don’t spend 720 yuan on microtransactions

Shen Yuan annoyedly waits for the loading bar in his phone screen to load.

It has been at least fifty minutes since this damned game has started downloading; while the hospital’s Wi-fi isn’t exactly the best one around, it surely isn’t bad enough to leave Shen Yuan waiting for so long for a stupid mobile dating sim to download! How the hell can a single game have more than 50gb of downloadable content after just being launched?!

That 50gb occupating my phone storage better have some hidden lore not addressed in the novel, Shen Yuan thinks as the progress bar slowly reaches the end. 98%, half of that probably being dedicated to cringy suggestive dialogue, if the game is a true part of the PIDW universe. Knowing Airplane’s cashgrabby tendencies, Shen Yuan can’t help but let out a sigh at the thought of his impending disappointment.

Suddenly, the promotional art of Luo Binghe fighting monsters during his time in the Endless Abyss changes to a quick animation of bamboo leaves floating around with mountains standing behind them, alongside a calm and melodic traditional song. The download bar is gone, with Shen Yuan finally being able to see the game’s menu.

In big, bold traditional lettering, *Proud Immortal Demon Romance* is finally in Shen Yuan’s hands.

In true, authentic Proud Immortal Demon Way style, Airplane/the game’s creative directors did not put an ounce of imagination into naming — truthfully, Shen Yuan didn’t expect any more from them, but he surely expected way less, so he will take the win. It was already surprising that Airplane authorized the creation of not just a PIDW game, but a PIDW Otome game instead of a trashy gacha battle royale style game with sexualized woman everywhere dressed in scraps one could barely call clothes.

Of course, not straying from Airplane’s cashgrab lifestyle, the game has microtransactions — which Shen Yuan is shamefully prepared for, his credit card perfectly ready inside his virtual wallet. Well, it’s not like Shen Yuan has anything else to spend his parents hard-earned money, at least besides the mountain of hospital bills that are about to flood his house once he is cleared to go back home.

It is a tad uncomfortable to play with a cannula stuck on his right arm, but Shen Yuan has long been used by the feeling of his veins about to burst whenever he moves the arm too fast or with too much strength. If something kills him, it surely won’t be bursting one little vein open.

Quickly logging into the game, Shen Yuan presses the ‘start game’ button with anticipation creeping through his body.

He has a reason to be excited about the game’s launch! First, the focus would not be on romancing Luo Binghe’s huge harem of mostly forgettable maidens, but instead it focuses on

romancing both Luo Binghe and his most memorable generals and the last generation of Cang Qiong Peak Lords!

Shen Yuan was pleasantly surprised when it was announced. Some fans got angry at the fact the game would be of the 'dating simulation' genre, mostly the ones who read PIDW for the papapapa scenes. Now, the *true* fans were ecstatic to hear it — many of the Peak Lords had huge fandoms of their own, even if overshadowed by Luo Binghe, Mobei-Jun and the harem's popularity.

Shen Yuan is absolutely going to romance Liu Qingge the moment he starts the Cang Qiong route. Not that he's *gay* or anything, of course not! It's just that the amount of lore that not only Liu Qingge's route but all the Cang Qiong Peak Lords could provide — it is all Shen Yuan ever wanted from a hack author like Airplane. It would explain so much about the novel that never got its spotlight, that fans like Shen Yuan could only spend hours upon hours exploring PIDW forums to discuss their theories.

That is, if this game actually bothers to include some lore in it.

Shen Yuan wants to believe it will, he really does. Airplane isn't a terrible author per se, he's just an absolute sellout that will write anything for money, even borderline monsterfucking if that's what got the most votes in his last poll. Shen Yuan remembers that one time he spent a whole night rigging votes with bots just so the option 'Threesome with the Catkin Twins' wouldn't win, because he felt like that would have literally nothing to do with the current plot. Thankfully, his plan worked, and Shen Yuan only had to skim over a boring Sha Hualing focused chapter with a little too many feet scenes appearing on it.

Even if the game has some… suggestive content in it, Shen Yuan is pretty sure no one will enter his room for the next few hours. A nurse had just given him his nighttime medicine and changed his IV fluids, besides checking his signals just to make sure everything is ok — which it is. His kidneys already healed a lot, and they don't even hurt that much anymore! Soon enough, he should be good to go home.

As the game finishes launching, Shen Yuan is greeted with two options — Tales of Cang Qiong Mountain and Legends of the Endless Abyss. Shen Yuan wants to play both routes, of course, but he cannot deny he is a little more curious about the first. The Abyss route is pretty self-explanatory; you start in the Endless Abyss and eventually find your way to the Demon Realm, where many characters will be available for courting.

In Cang Qiong's route, however, you start as a new disciple to the famous sect — alongside the disciples that would eventually become the last Peak Lords of Cang Qiong Sect. Luo Binghe isn't even born yet, and some leaks said there would even be a battle between the sects and Luo Binghe's Heavenly Demon father who got sealed. How can Shen Yuan not be excited to play it?!

The amount of lore that could appear…! New monsters, new villains, new locations to explore — and with the absolutely overpowered abilities some of the peak lords have, it should be as epic as Luo Binghe's struggles in the Endless Abyss! Tapping the Cang Qiong story mode as frantically as he can, Shen Yuan anxiously watches as the screen fades into black.

A pop-up suddenly appears, making Shen Yuan frown.

> Does user wish to activate ‘write your dialogue’ mode? Pre-made dialogue can be chosen at any time by clicking the ‘…’ icon during a dialogue.
>
> Disclaimer: pre-made cutscenes do not include ‘write your dialogue’ mode. Feature still in testing, so bugs may be experienced.

A demonstration of the game with and without the option being activated is displayed under the pop up. Shen Yuan ponders for a moment, deciding to activate the option. He didn’t really expect Airplane to have invested that much money into the game, to the point you can decide your answers yourself and (hopefully) the characters will answer accordingly.

Pressing the ‘yes’ button, Shen Yuan watches as the pop up closes and a cutscene starts playing.

The camera flies from the sky to a burning village, screams being cut by the growling of beasts and the wailing of people. Shen Yuan doesn’t doubt this is where the main character lives, since every self-respecting MC must have a tragic background — what’s more tragic than seeing your whole family and village being devoured by demonic beasts?

As predicted, the camera quickly zooms into first person view, a middle-aged woman lying on the dirty wooden floor, covered by ashes and blood. The woman looks towards the camera with teary eyes, reaching her hand towards the MC.

> “You… must survive,” the woman weakly says, coughing as she speaks. Her hand moves above the main character’s own hand, placing a small, wood-carved pendant on it. “Leave before it’s too late…”

Shen Yuan sighs at the cliché background, complete with the MC’s own version of Luo Binghe’s jade pendant. To the game’s only defense so far, the graphics are pretty cool, especially since it is a mobile game yet somehow the 3D models all look realistic and the physics seem to be decent as well. Airplane’s money-grabbing operations worked out in the end, if that author could fund such graphics.

> “Mama,” the MC says, voice chocked up with upcoming sobs. “You must stay awake- help will come soon, surely!”

Protagonist, your mother was fated to die the moment Airplane started pitching the game’s story to executives, Shen Yuan sighs in his mind. As expected, the MC’s mother smiles one final time before closing her eyes forever, leaving the MC sobbing at their late mother’s side. Not for long, however, because Shen Yuan barely has the time to blink before a sudden loud noise echoes through his earbuds.

A wolf-like beast appears out of nowhere, jumping towards the MC as a time-sensitive event shows on the screen, causing Shen Yuan to immediately tap it. The MC dodges the beast, rolling to the side opposite of their mother’s body. Another time-sensitive event appears, with even less time given for Shen Yuan to choose an option as he is presented with three.

- Grab a wood plank
- Attempt to kick the beast
- Throw a glass bottle

In a panic, Shen Yuan chooses the second option, which turns out to be a very terrible choice. His meager 5 health points are immediately down to 2 as the wolf bites on the protagonist's leg. Shen Yuan grunts in annoyance as he is once again given the choices, minus the one he had chosen before. Perhaps throwing a glass bottle could work?

Thankfully, the glass bottle hits right on the beast's head and it slumps to the ground unconscious. Shen Yuan is conflicted if he should be happy that the game at least requires a few functioning braincells to play, or if he should be pissed off the kick he chose also hit the beast's head but didn't knock it unconscious for who knows what reason.

> Looking around, you see an abandoned bag. When you check the inside, you find **5 low-grade tonics** and **3 bandages.** Placing them inside your bag, you tearfully look back towards your mother before turning away and running.

Shen Yuan immediately opens the MC's inventory and looks at the new finds. The low-grade tonics restore 5 health points per use, and the bandages only restore 2. Shen Yuan decides to use two of the bandages instead of a tonic, since he's pretty sure that's supposed to be his healing materials for not only the prologue, but also the first chapter. Why would the game give him so many, then?

At least now the character can't get one shotted, Shen Yuan thinks as he clicks twice on the bandages. Leaving the inventory and going back to the prologue, Shen Yuan watches the camera bounce as the character runs and jumps through charred wood and burnt corpses. Then, another time-limited event, because apparently that's gonna be the main battle mode until Shen Yuan gets a weapon.

- Fling your bag on the beast's face
- Grab a fallen piece of wood plank
- Dodge and run

Weary of his last option to beat a wolf with only his leg, Shen Yuan immediately chooses to pick the fallen piece of wood plank. Dodge and run could perhaps work, but it sounds like it might fail as well — after all, isn't this supposed to be a very fast and strong beast?

> You pick a piece of wood plank on the ground and aim for the beast's head. Upon impact, you notice the wood plank had been damaged in the fire, as it quickly breaks apart and only makes the beast angrier. -2 health points.

- Fling your bag on the beast's face
- Dodge and run

Fuck it, Shen Yuan is gonna just choose the dodge and run option and be done with it. What gave Airplane the right to make such an annoying game?! How was Shen Yuan supposed to know the plank was damaged? It's utter crap, just as PIDW's nonsensical plots have always been. Of course, that won't stop Shen Yuan from playing. Out of a need to hate, of course.

At least running works out in his favor. Before any next encounters with more beasts, Shen Yuan opens the inventory once again to use the last bandages. He doesn't suck at the game, the game is simply unreasonable with its choices! Is Shen Yuan really supposed to follow a guide to know what answer is the correct one? Out of sheer pettiness, Shen Yuan refuses to open Weibo to look for a guide.

As expected, the beast does catch up with the poor protagonist. However, no time-limited events appear, so Shen Yuan knows this must mean someone else will kill the beast because the protagonist won't die horribly, which means…!

> As you struggle against the beast, you hear a fast-approaching noise. A sword flies into the beast's side, the creature howling in pain as it falls to the side, its blood splattered through your clothes. Bewildered, you look up to meet the gaze of your savior.

Shen Yuan gasps at the new appearance. Airplane really put money into graphics, especially for the male leads…! What else would explain the most beautiful face Shen Yuan had ever seen in a video game staring right back at him, blood splattered just at the right place at the person's jaw, just enough that he looks sort of sexy. Black hair cascades from his ponytail, with a part of his bangs falling to the side as well, his hair just as high-quality as the drop of sweat slowly falling down his perfect face.

It is very sexy, as expected of an otome game. Not that Shen Yuan thinks that, of course, he's just analyzing what the game is trying to do.

> He looks at you with an indiscernible expression for a second before turning his head to the left, quickly calling back his sword and charging towards another beast. You stay bewildered, looking at the massacre caused by the demonic beasts who ravaged your village with wide, shocked eyes.

The fight choreographer also worked overtime, for Shen Yuan's delight. Truthfully, one of the most interesting aspects of PIDW is the combat, especially the way Luo Binghe would plan his victory and the way he managed to overcome any obstacle with logic instead of brute strength.

Other characters join in the fight, the beasts not standing a chance against the five disciples charging against them. Shen Yuan assumes the only girl must be the Xian Shu Peak Lord, who fiercely strikes her sword as lilac ribbons fly alongside her hair. He doesn't need any clues besides the blue-greenish disciple robes worn by one of the boys to know it must be Shen Qingqiu — who, surprisingly, fights just as well as the others.

There was some commotion in the fandom as it was announced that Shen Qingqiu was one of the characters available to romance. Shen Yuan was baffled by the decision at first; Shen Qingqiu is, quite literally, a piece of trash and an abuser who killed Qiu Haitang's family mercilessly. However, the Qing Jing Peak Lord's character always felt awfully rushed, as if Airplane did once have a deeper story meant for him yet chose to go with the easier 0 IQ villain.

Still, Shen Yuan doesn't feel like trying out Shen Qingqiu's route, at least for now. Airplane is going to have to work overtime to find a way to give an explanation to Shen Qingqiu's

actions in a way that doesn't make him into a disgusting lecher and a cruel murderer.

There's another two disciples fighting, one using a shining dao and another using a sword that is clearly not his spiritual sword — just based off the fact it has zero decorations and is clearly not a special sword in any way. *That must be Yue Qingyuan,* Shen Yuan excitedly thinks. As expected of the sect leader that had to be sniped off-screen due to his OP abilities that would give Luo Binghe too much trouble, Yue Qingyuan slashes through countless beasts without breaking a sweat; and all while using a normal sword!

The camera moves to the side as the MC turns their head, another disciple approaching their position — from the head garment, Shen Yuan thinks this must be Mu Qingfang.

> "Are you injured?" the disciple asks, hands upon a small bag strapped to his waist. You nod, feeling the wounds from the beast's attack with each move you take. The disciple opens his bag but immediately looks up, and before you can understand what is happening, a needle flies through the air and hits an approaching beast with perfect accuracy, making the beast fall unconscious to the ground.

Why did this sort of thing never appear in PIDW?! Shen Yuan internally screams, already imagining the countless fight techniques never used during the novel that could be as cool as Mu Qingfang's aimbot needle. Did Airplane finally decide to become a decent author?

> "Mu-shidi seems to have dealt with the last beast," one of the disciples says, his eyes lingering on you with surprise. "I thought there were no survivors-"
>
> "Wei-shidi should consider thinking before speaking," another disciple sneers, looking down at his bloodied robes and sword with disgust before turning away to inspect the dead beasts.
>
> You look around the village, finding only the remnants of the place you grew up at. Ashes scattered throughout the ground fly with the wind, and tears start forming in your eyes as you grip the wooden pendant in your pocket with grief.

Shen Yuan gives it two chapters before the MC's grief is completely gone. At least he has found out who the unknown disciple is — Wei Qingwei, from Wan Jian Peak.

> "Don't mind them," disciple Mu says, reaching out a small cylindrical flask towards you. You reach for it, your fingers brushing against the disciple's own for a split second, which causes him to widen his eyes in surprise. Startled, the disciple retracts his hand and looks to another disciple standing nearby watching. "Yue-shixiong has recently learned how to identify someone's potential, correct?"
>
> "Yes, that is correct," disciple Yue says, furrowing his brows for a moment before turning towards you with a polite smile. "Would you mind reaching your wrist for a moment? It seems like my shidi has felt something different in you."
>
> Unsure of what they mean by 'different', you nod your head in confusion. Reaching your wrist towards the disciple, you watch as he sits next to you and places two of his fingers on top of your wrist.

Truthfully, Airplane went all-in for the clichés, if somehow touching the MC immediately makes a cultivator notice their potential. It seems like the protagonist is indeed a Mary-Sue, parents dying in a tragedy and a hidden potential being found just as their life takes a turn for the worst — and of course, they are just about to get into the Human Realm's most prestigious sect.

> Gasping lightly for a second, disciple Yue looks up to your eyes with anticipation. "Your spiritual veins hold unforeseen potential. Even starting later than most, you could easily become a great cultivator," he says, causing you to widen your eyes in surprise. "There is no doubt you can easily join a sect. We are disciples from Cang Qiong Mountain Sect; would you like to go back with us and see if a Peak Lord might want to take you as a disciple?"
>
> "Really…?" you ask, shocked by the statement. You are but a normal person from a small village, how could you hold so much potential? Disciple Yue nods and smiles, reaching his hand.
>
> You make a decision. Looking around your destroyed village one last time, you look up towards disciple Yue and speak. "Yes, I will go to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect."

Shen Yuan wants to bash his head against the bedside table right next to him, but wisely refrains from doing it. As he expected, MC is the most powerful and incredible person to ever grace the earth. It didn't even take them two chapters to get over the grief of seeing their whole village being massacred in front of them; they are immediately ready to make life-altering decisions with zero hesitation instead of breaking down mentally because they, quite literally, *just saw their whole village being massacred and mauled by beasts.*

Any compliments given to Airplane are immediately confiscated for further revision. The fact the male lead models look so good is solely due to the hard work of the artists involved. Airplane, as always, did nothing useful for humanity once again.

> "Ah, forgive this one, but I forgot to ask it before," disciple Yue says upon holding your hand and helping you stand. "What is your name?"
>
> "My name is…"

A box pops up on the screen, prompting Shen Yuan to write a name and a surname. After a few seconds of pondering if he should make up a stupid name and go with it, he finds that his mind can't come up with anything to his liking. Shen Yuan wonders if it would be too cringy to put his own name; it's just a game, no one would know he just put his own name in a dating sim that has guys as love interests, right?

In the end, Shen Yuan writes his own name as his face burns with embarrassment. It's just a game, and he's not gay, so it's ok!

As he clicks the 'accept' option, the screen then shows a list of skills.

> Choose skills to apply points. Choice will not affect the player's Peak.

- Health: lvl 0
- Speed: lvl 0
- Intelligence: lvl 0
- Strength: lvl 0
- Awareness: lvl 0
- Dexterity: lvl 0
- Charm: lvl 0
- Beauty: lvl 0
- Luck: lvl 0

Remaining points: **21**

Shen Yuan stares baffled at the last options. What the hell is ‘charm’ and ‘beauty’ supposed to do?! Only in Airplane’s game would someone find such options, even worse is that they might actually be OP abilities considering this is inside PIDW. It doesn’t take longer than a few seconds for Shen Yuan to immediately start spamming the buttons in those abilities, maxing out the ‘beauty’ stat and giving himself 8 ‘charm’ points.

The remaining three points could be used on anything, truthfully. Shen Yuan settles on using one in ‘luck’ and the other two in ‘speed’, since it might be useful for dodging or something like that. Without a second thought, Shen Yuan clicks the ‘accept’ button once more and watches as the screen fades to dark and the prologue is complete.

Immediately clicking to continue to the first chapter, Shen Yuan watches as a cutscene starts playing, like an anime opening with the love interest’s names in it. Surprisingly, not every peak lord is available for romancing — in fact, only the peak lords that had a little more screen time in the novel are present. Shen Yuan is not sure who exactly wanted a Shang Qinghua dating sim, but he guesses there must be a small but rich part of the fandom that likes the An Ding Peak Lord.

In total, there are five options: Yue Qingyuan, Shen Qingqiu, Shang Qinghua, Liu Qingge and Mu Qingfang.

Shen Yuan has no clue why poor Wei Qingwei was left out, and he assumes it was the lack of demand or Airplane didn’t feel like writing an extra backstory. At least you could be accepted into most peaks, with the exclusion of Ku Xing Peak.

Unfortunately, Shen Yuan should have minded more about his choices during the prologue — apparently it defined the peak in which he would have to be a disciple of. It seems like having bad luck and having to use multiple medicines to heal your character must mean they are a perfect fit for Qian Cao, because… They know how to apply bandages? Shen Yuan is still not sure of the logic behind the choice, but whatever.

The first chapter turned out to be more boring than anything. It’s just a guide for how the game works and how to gain skills, which consist of going to class and doing actions that improve said skill. The game works on a task system, and of course is filled with microtransactions for when you run out of stamina but you absolutely need to gather more materials and have no patience to wait until tomorrow, which is Shen Yuan’s case.

That 720 yuan charge on Shen Yuan's credit card is a shameful reminder of that. Even worse, as soon as the shop was available, Shen Yuan spared no time spending that money so he could rid himself of any grinding inconveniences.

Shen Yuan only managed to get a single extra dexterity point from three days of class that he could be using to flirt with the male leads; apparently, you need intelligence to improve quicker. Why did Airplane decide to be meticulous with that out of everything?!

There's barely any interaction with any of the romantic options during the first chapter. Shen Yuan's character had a brief meeting with Mu Qingfang that lasted two lines of dialogue and that was it; at least he hadn't run into Shen Qingqiu. Running into others was sort of complicated as well, since Shen Yuan had to grind a lot to increase his dexterity — which is very needed for Qian Cao, apparently — so his character doesn't get negatives points for their shit skills.

So, when the second chapter starts, Shen Yuan is begging the game for something more. Thankfully, the chapter is focused on a small mission near Cang Qiong, and no strength skills are needed since Shen Yuan's character is from Qian Cao and is simply accompanying some Bai Zhan disciples and providing minor healing for them if anything goes awry.

In fact, most of the chapter is in the visual novel format, so it is more of a big cutscene rather than actually playing. Shen Yuan is more interested in watching the beasts rather than paying attention to the NPCs who don't seem to have any useful information or lore to tell him.

It is late and Shen Yuan knows he should go to sleep soon, but he holds on until he can finish the chapter. By the time the character arrives in the location, Shen Yuan is half-reading the sentences, simply clicking so the game goes by faster.

> You watch from afar as the Bai Zhan disciples fiercely fight against the Blood-eyed Owls, always on standby if anything goes awry. However, before you can realize, a disciple shouts at you, eyes widened as he looks at your location. "Move!"

A jumpscare worthy of being in a horror film appears, two scarily red eyes popping out of nowhere as the character turns their head. Shen Yuan lets out a startled curse, his heart rate going up immediately as he places a hand on his heart. The chapter ends there, the screen fading out as Shen Yuan curses once again and turns off the phone.

Airplane is a devil, he's sure. Who would expect a jumpscare in a goddamn PIDW game?! Shen Yuan surely didn't. In fact, he was so unprepared for it that his head has started pounding because of the stress it brought him — because his night wasn't bad enough already.

Stupid fucking game, Shen Yuan curses in his head. It can't just be a game made to wear you out with its never-stopping grind so you are more susceptible to buying the useless currency sold by it, it now wants to kill its customers too!

The pressure in his head increases with each second, to the point where Shen Yuan is pondering if he has a really bad migraine. He usually doesn't get those, but perhaps Airplane knew exactly what to do to stress him out — including the fact he barely interacted with any

of the characters he wanted three chapters into the damn game. How is Shen Yuan supposed to find out any lore about PIDW when he can't find the damn characters!

It's too late into the night for Shen Yuan to call for a nurse, and he's too thin faced to do that anyways; he sort of did it to himself, after all, so no one else needs to know he stayed up well into 3AM playing a shitty otome game. Shen Yuan can just sleep it off as he usually does whenever he's in pain!

As Shen Yuan lays in bed with a pounding headache, his conscience slowly drifts away as the patient monitor's noise fades.

Opening his eyes slowly, Shen Yuan feels as if he just got run over by a truck and then got run over by a train as an extra treat.

Honestly, pinpointing what hurts is very difficult — it is as if his whole body is twisting from the inside, sporadic bursts of pain making his muscles contract in agony. *What the hell even happened to cause this…?* Shen Yuan ponders, fully opening his eyes and finding… a wooden ceiling, somehow.

The hospital has no rooms with wooden ceilings, he's pretty sure of that. Not even his house has one, at least his apartment; Shen Yuan thinks his parent's resting house outside the city has one, but he's not sure. In any case, he has no reason to be there, especially not when he's clearly having something.

This pain isn't something Shen Yuan has experienced before. Pain is something that varies wildly depending on its place and intensity, and this surely doesn't feel like that one time his joints decided to rebel against his body, neither does it feel like the countless times he's had high fevers that just wouldn't go away. This, however, just feels like he's dying and being brought back to his misery whenever the pain dissipates for a few seconds.

"…shidi? Can you hear me?" someone says, causing Shen Yuan to groan in pain and close his eyes as the noise just makes things worse. This does not deter the person from speaking again, this time being heard more clearly by Shen Yuan. "Shen-shidi, please hang on. Shizun is already fetching the antidote for you…"

"What?" Shen Yuan mutters, wondering if he heard that wrong. Maybe he played too much yesterday and now he's hearing things, great.

"Shizun will be here soon," the person replies, a worried sigh coming out. "I knew Shen-shidi shouldn't have gone to a mission so soon into training… Those Bai Zhan disciples were too careless, letting Shen-shidi be so close to the beasts…"

Shen Yuan's brain activates at the mention of Bai Zhan, his eyes immediately opening as he shoots his body upright in shock, almost bumping into the person's head if not for them dodging. The room in front of him is absolutely not in the hospital — unless they have a traditional ward and didn't tell him.

However, that wouldn't explain what the hell a person looking the exact same as Mu Qingfang's 3D model in PIDW's game is doing sitting next to his bed, staring wide-eyed at him as if Shen Yuan has just gone crazy. Perhaps he has, as he is clearly hallucinating. Is this the afterlife? And if so, is the afterlife really just PIDW?

"Where am I?!" Shen Yuan frantically asks, earnestly hoping this is either a very vivid dream or just a hallucination.

"Shidi is in Qian Cao, recuperating after being bitten by a Blood-eyed Owl," the Mu Qingfang-lookalike's shock at the sudden movement is quickly gone as reaches his hands towards Shen Yuan's shoulders with a careful grip. "Shen-shidi, I understand you're confused, but please do not move so harshly, there's still venom in your body-!"

Shen Yuan doesn't get to hear the rest of whatever Mu Qingfang's lookalike has to say before fainting back into unconsciousness.

Chapter 2: don’t put all your points into useless skills

Chapter Summary

> Shen Yuan wakes up to the System assigning him his first quest, and with no time to think before having his first actual encounter with Mu Qingfang.

Chapter Notes

> hi! how is everyone doing? thank you all for the kind comments and kudos, i hope this fic will not disappoint you all ehehehe <33 i perhaps gave up one day of studying to write this, but its fine i’m brainwashing myself into thinking i’m training for the essay part of the exam (that isn’t written in english but. i need an excuse)
> anyways, hope you guys enjoy the chapter!!! <33
>
> twt and bluesky: shiyooji

Shen Yuan wakes up to an excruciating headache that amplifies the second he opens his eyes.

That godforsaken pain from before is gone, replaced by a mild ache in his left arm that also amplifies as he tries to move his fingers. There’s a pleasant flowery smell in the air, which Shen Yuan much prefers rather than the usual lavender-scented sanitizer from the hospital. It seems like he’s still at the strange PIDW-based hallucination from before, as the structure of the room is exactly the same.

There’s not much time given to Shen Yuan to examine the room before a bright box pops up in front of him.

【 Loading System… 】

A startled screech comes out of Shen Yuan as he watches the computer program-like box, an uneasy feeling settling in his stomach as he wonders if his worst fears have come true. Shen Yuan is unlucky, but surely not *that* unlucky, right?

Did he truly die…?

【 Loading complete. 】

【 Welcome to the System. This System operates in line with the design concept “YOU CAN YOU UP, NO CAN NO BB”; we hope to provide you with the best possible

experience. It is our sincere wish that during your time, you can fulfill your desires and, in accordance with your wish, transform a stupid game into a magnificent, high-quality, first-rate classic by discovering the hidden lore.】

【First quest assigned: pass Mu Qingfang's assessment. Reward: 50 R-Points.】

Shen Yuan isn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Of all places to transmigrate, he had to transmigrate into the PIDW dating sim — is he really going to have to romance dudes who will die horrifically in the future, once Luo Binghe torches down the whole sect? On top of that, he's pretty sure he's still a man — how can he date other men?!

Besides, what does the quest even mean? There is no further explanation, and the System hasn't bothered explaining what a R-Point is either. What happens if Shen Yuan fails?

【R-Points are awarded upon furthering the plot and can be exchanged for special perks and benefits. Failure of quest 'pass Mu Qingfang's assessment' will result in a loss of 100 R-Points.】

Shen Yuan assumes he has zero of the 'R-Points' right now, as he has just woken up. If they are used for perks and benefits, it would be good to keep some in case of emergencies. Surely an assessment given to a recently poisoned patient will not be that hard to complete, right?

Everything still feels so surreal, so absurd. What else can Shen Yuan do but keep going on? If he's really dead in his world, then the only way he can keep living is by not fucking it up here. Shen Yuan can't allow himself to think of everything he left behind, at least not right now — he can hear footsteps right outside his door.

There is no time left for Shen Yuan to recompose himself as the door suddenly opens, revealing (apparently not a lookalike but the real deal) Mu Qingfang and another man, who Shen Yuan assumes must be another disciple.

"Shen-shidi," Mu Qingfang greets, giving him a smile. "You have been asleep for quite awhile. Does shidi feel any discomfort or pain?"

Shen Yuan has read too many transmigration novels to know it is smarter to play along. From what he can tell, his name is still the same, or at least the family name is. "Only some discomfort in my arm, but it's bearable."

"Then Wang-shidi will bring some medicine for your pain," Mu Qingfang says, turning his head towards the other disciple and nodding. As soon as the other leaves the room, the head disciple pulls a wooden chair and sits next to the bed. "As Shen-shidi was asleep for a fairly long time, there are a few tests this one must administer to assess your condition. Is that fine with Shen-shidi?"

Without any other option but accepting, Shen Yuan nods and prays it won't be difficult. If he's inside Proud Immortal Demon Romance, then he should focus on stuff he has seen up until waking up — and later he will try to ask the System about it. Hopefully he gets discharged soon, which will allow Shen Yuan to process the situation better and plan what to do.

“Then we will start,” the head disciple says, holding a bamboo pen in one hand and paper in other. “What is your name?”

“Shen Yuan,” he answers, praying to every deity known to him for his in-game name to be the same here.

Mu Qingfang hums. Should Shen Yuan take that as ‘correct’? “What peak are you a disciple of?”

Holding back another breath, he decides to go with his game-assigned peak. Shen Yuan is still a tad bitter he didn’t get the beast peak. “Qian Cao.”

A smile appears in the head disciple’s face, which makes Shen Yuan mentally let out a sigh of relief (and maybe feel a little guilty about not wanting to be a Qian Cao disciple). So he should just follow what he has done in the game so far, and everything will be alright!

“What is the last thing you can recall before waking up?” Mu Qingfang asks, to which Shen Yuan shudders at the thought.

Very nice of you to ask, I remember dying a very painful death and leaving all my loved ones behind only to wake up in a dating simulator made to extort money from lonely people. Shen Yuan doesn’t say that, but he does consider it for a brief moment. Instead, he breathes slowly and tries to recount the end of the second chapter of the game.

“This… shidi went on a mission with some Bai Zhan disciples in case they needed healing, but something attacked me,” Shen Yuan replies, feeling a tad weird about having to use such old speech but doing it anyway; he’ll have to get used to it, after all. “There’s nothing this one can remember after that.”

Nodding once again, Mu Qingfang writes something down on the paper, in a way Shen Yuan would have to move to see what’s written. Hospitals are the same everywhere, apparently.

“Shen-shidi fell unconscious after being attacked and was brought back to Qian Cao immediately,” Mu Qingfang explains, putting away his pen and paper inside his sleeve. Does Shen Yuan also have a qiankun pouch? That would be immensely useful… “Thankfully, Shizun had the antidote to the Blood-eyed Owl’s venom, so it is completely gone from Shen-shidi’s body.”

“Ah, I see…” he replies, shivering at the thought of the pain from before. At least Luo Binghe had immunity to most poisons, unlike Shen Yuan’s Mary-Sue character. “When may this one be discharged?”

“Shen-shidi will stay for a few shichen to make sure there are no side effects,” the head disciple explains, giving an encouraging smile as he notices Shen Yuan slumping back into the bed. “…But if everything goes as expected, this shixiong thinks shidi may be able to go back to the dormitories before dinner.”

Shen Yuan nods, already thinking of talking to NPCs once dinner time arrives. They’re usually a great source of information to get a hang of what’s going on, and perhaps get some

gossip on the other peaks — and consequently, the other future peak lords. Hopefully Shen Yuan will have some time alone before that, as he needs to ask the System some questions to make sure how to proceed.

"This shidi understands," Shen Yuan replies, mentally giving himself a high-five as he manages to speak convoluted ancient speech without sounding awkward. So, with a smile in face, Shen Yuan confidently speaks. "Thanking Mu-shixiong for the care."

That's supposed to be Shen Yuan's way of saying *'I want you to leave so I can be alone',* as it is usually what he says to doctors whenever both of them notice there's nothing left to say and the doctor probably has better things to do. Mu Qingfang rises from the seat next to the bed way too quickly, immediately turning his face as he mutters something unintelligible.

Shen Yuan notices his ears are oddly red as he leaves the room. Ah, maybe there's someone talking about him? In any case, Shen Yuan has finally been left alone, which means he has enough time to check the System and what it wants from him. Coincidentally, a ping echoes through his ears as the cursed box appears in front of him once again.

【 Quest 'pass Mu Qingfang's assessment' successfully completed! +50 R-Points, 5 Affection Points added to character 'Qian Cao's Head Disciple, Mu Qingfang'! 】

【 What may this System help with today? 】

…Does it read Shen Yuan's mind? "Why am I here? Did I die in my world?"

【 User has been granted with this exclusive, once-in-a-lifetime experience as a reward for being the first person to use the 'Proud Immortal Demon Romance' game store. User's original body has not died, and will be returned to User upon completion of any of 'Proud Immortal Demon Romance' 146 story lines. 】

"I'll be able to go back when I get any ending?" Shen Yuan skeptically asks, knowing this is too good to be true (or at least easy). He can deal with the fact he has been the first person to spend money — and even worse, 720 yuan — on this stupid game later. "What's the catch?"

【 User must define 'catch'. We only wish to provide User with a five-star experience of your wishes. 】

Stupid computer, Shen Yuan groans in his head. "Whatever. Can you explain what I need to do, then?"

【 User will receive quests, which will guide the User further to complete the User's goals. Some quests will be unlocked upon special interactions. Most quests can be completed upon the User's discretion, but failure will result in activation of the punishment protocol. Main quests are needed for the story's progression and will be tagged as such. Smaller tasks can be assigned by NPCs for reputation points, item and money rewards. 】

Simple enough, or at least Shen Yuan thinks so. Considering it is a dating simulator, Shen Yuan will have to choose who to romance, so it makes sense some quests are not obligatory and are most likely character-specific. Don't get Shen Yuan wrong; he's still very much straight, but he's willing to do anything if it means going back to his original body. He's even willing to kiss someone if he needs to!

The 'punishment protocol' part does scare Shen Yuan a little, but if he can accept quests on his own discretion, then he will only accept quests he is sure he can handle. These are supposed to be secondary, non-necessary quests, so surely they won't be much of a hassle if he misses a few in favor of only doing safer quests.

"Does the game mechanics stay the same? What will happen if I run out of health points?" Shen Yuan asks, tackling this very important question as early as he can.

【 Skills and Special Skills have been revamped to fit User's situation. The documents 'skilltutorial.docx' and 'specialskilltutorial.docx' are available for User to read at any time. In case of depletion of health points, user will be brought back to the latest checkpoint available. Checkpoints are automatically created at 5AM of each day and before battle scenarios. 】

At least he won't really die, which is a bonus. Shen Yuan only needs to complete any route as fast as he can and go back to his normal life, to his family, to everything he is used to. There's no time left for mental breakdowns, only time for Shen Yuan to figure out a strategy and pick an easy target to romance.

Before closing the System and using his time to do anything more productive, Shen Yuan has one more question. "What can I use R-Points for?"

【 R-Points can be used in the System Shop for weapon upgrades, supplies and rare artifacts. It can also be used for Scenario Pushers, which can be used when the User encounters difficulties when completing tasks and quests. 】

Another made-up currency I'll have to sacrifice my soul to gather, Shen Yuan quietly cries to himself. He's way too used to mobile gaming to not be scared whenever these niche, potentially required for survival virtual currencies appear to rob him of his sanity.

Perhaps sensing that its presence was no longer necessary nor tolerated, the System quietly disappears from Shen Yuan's view as he sighs and looks around the room. It's arranged somewhat similarly to how a modern hospital room is, but make it ancient — and xianxia. It's also completely devoid of anything Shen Yuan could do to pass his time, so the only thing left for him to do is remember as much as he can about the game.

MC doesn't have any surviving family, which is a relief. Shen Yuan won't have to deal with faking close relations, neither will he have to deal with getting caught in a lie if anyone asks about his family — if they're all dead, then no one will be able to object to Shen Yuan making up stuff if anyone asks more.

Unfortunately, Shen Yuan didn't look into many leaks before the game's launch, so any knowledge of how to deal with the characters will have to be taken from PIDW lore. Mu Qingfang is supposed to be a pretty decent person, if he was the only Peak Lord to survive Luo Binghe's reign of terror that ended with Cang Qiong as a charred wasteland. Yue Qingyuan has *something* going on with Shen Qingqiu, so much that he would die for him. Liu Qingge dies too early for his personality to be mentioned, so it could be a little bit of a wild card.

Shang Qinghua is mentioned plenty of times, all of which make Shen Yuan want to stay as far away from that man as humanly possible. Nothing good can come from trying the An Ding Peak Lord's route, even during his disciple days; besides, PIDW describes him as an arrogant and selfish man who betrays his sect due to the belief he was too good for them, only to be murdered by the demon he had betrayed Cang Qiong with.

Shen Qingqiu is a no-no. That man is too much of a cartoon villain only written to do every evil conceived by Airplane's mind for Shen Yuan to get anywhere close to him. Besides, that man somehow already has tons of enemies even when he's just a disciple, which screams 'difficult route' to Shen Yuan.

Yue Qingyuan is supposed to be a decent person, but his… thing going on with Shen Qingqiu is enough for Shen Yuan to avoid his route. What if Shen Qingqiu is like a bitter, crazy ex in Yue Qingyuan's route?! Shen Yuan doesn't feel like becoming knockoff Luo Binghe, thank you very much.

The safest bet would be to try Mu Qingfang's route. He's a calm, nice person who doesn't have enemies and gets along with everyone. Absolutely the type of man that respects boundaries and isn't anything outside of wholesome, which is exactly what Shen Yuan needs, and the fact he's already a Qian Cao disciple only proves that Mu Qingfang is the easiest way to go.

Shen Yuan victoriously smiles as he looks up to the wooden ceiling. It shouldn't be too hard, he can follow the System's quests and figure it out from there.

A knock echoes through the room, taking Shen Yuan away from his thoughts as he watches the door carefully opening, revealing the disciple that had accompanied Mu Qingfang before.

"Wang-shixiong," Shen Yuan greets, hoping he got the disciple's surname and way of address right. As the disciple simply smiles, Shen Yuan assumes it must have been correct.

"Shen-shidi," the disciple greets back, closing the door before walking towards Shen Yuan with a bowl in hands. "Apologies for the delay. Some Bai Zhan kids tried fighting their head disciple *again…"*

"Oh, there's no need for shixiong to apologize," Shen Yuan replies, taking the bowl as it is offered to him. It smells… not great, but it does remind him of his grandma's homemade medicines enough for Shen Yuan to not grimace as he drinks. "What does shixiong mean by again?"

“Ah, I had forgotten shidi has been here for less than a year,” Wang-shixiong says, a sigh coming out of his mouth as he continues. “Shidi must know how things work on Bai Zhan at this point. Beat anyone who’s stronger than you and you’ve got the whole peak’s respect, or at least from the weaker disciples. Unfortunately, some morons tried to fight Liu-shixiong and all of them got absolutely wrecked to pieces...”

Shen Yuan feels his jaw drop at the insane lore that wasn’t ever mentioned in PIDW. “Do they… fight the head disciple that often?”

Disciple Wang sighs with annoyance. “Not exactly, but it is a mess whenever someone is dumb enough to do it. If Shen-shidi feels like practicing how to heal exposed bones, just wait until Liu-shixiong sends someone straight into the emergency ward. It’s a passage rite for any Qian Cao disciple!”

Liu Qingge being called a ‘War God’ surely isn’t a joke, then. “…This shidi will leave it to shixiong who is more experienced.”

Wang-shixiong laughs heartily as he takes away the empty bowl. “Mu-shixiong is taking care of it, so shidi is off the hook for now. Besides, it took this shixiong five years until Shizun allowed this one to heal such types of injuries, so Shen-shidi has a lot of time before having to deal with it.”

Shen Yuan lets out a sigh of relief, which earns him another laugh from disciple Wang. There’s not much to talk afterwards, as the other checks the wrappings on Shen Yuan’s arm and informs him someone will check on him later and possibly allow him to go back to the dormitories.

As soon as the door closes, the System chirps its annoying notification alarm as it pops up in front of Shen Yuan again.

【 +20 reputation points! Current points: 60. Earn 100 points to leave reputation level ‘Unknown Newbie’ and advance to reputation level ‘Acknowledged Disciple’. 】

Honestly, Shen Yuan had sort of forgotten the reputation mechanics. He had barely any time to talk to NPCs and do tasks to rise his reputation beyond 40 points, since he stupidly thought the game wouldn’t really consider the RPG stats as much as it does; if Shen Yuan had known it, he wouldn’t have set half his given points to the beauty stat…

Wait, if the reputation points I had transferred over, then what about my skills…?

As if mocking Shen Yuan, the System immediately opens his skill tab.

【 Skills

Health: lvl 1

Speed: lvl 2

Intelligence: lvl 1

Strength: lvl 0

Awareness: lvl 0

Dexterity: lvl 1

Charm: lvl 8

Beauty: lvl 10 [MAX]

Luck: lvl 1 】

Shen Yuan feels like bashing his head against the nearest wall. What was he thinking when he maxed out the beauty stat out of all things? Charm can be explained; it'll probably be useful for convincing people during tasks and quests, and will most likely make it easier for Shen Yuan to progress through any romancing attempt, but what can he do with max beauty but zero brawn *and* brain?!

System, how do I reassign some points to other skills????

【 'Skill Point Reassignment' is available to user for a bargain price of 5000 R-Points! Current R-Points: 50 】

"This is a fucking scam," Shen Yuan curses, keeping his voice barely above a mutter as to not alert anyone who might be near his room. "How do I gain the intelligence skill as fast as possible?"

【 User must study, of course! ଘ(ˊᵕˋ)ଓ 】

Shen Yuan has to use all his efforts to hold back the list of insults ready to leave his mouth. The System, taking a hint, pops out of Shen Yuan's view as he places a hand on his forehead, sighing as he wonders what to do. Taking one extra look around the room, he notices a few scrolls and books on top of a table on the side opposite to his bed.

Fuck it, let's just pretend it's the PIDW wiki. With that thought in mind, Shen Yuan gets up from the bed and takes the books from the table, glancing over the titles as he carries them to the bed with his unharmed arm. *Uses of nightblossom pollen for the treatment of low blood pressure, Theory of Qi Circulation volume 16, Research on the properties of honey from bees native to qi-heavy areas.* Very fun stuff to read, surely.

By the time a disciple arrives with lunch, Shen Yuan has read the first paper and not earned a single intelligence point. Perhaps taking pity on his puzzled expression, the disciple later brings Shen Yuan some paper and a simple bamboo pen to help with his studies. The rest of his afternoon is spent revising the three academic articles as if his life depended on it — which it does —, scribbling visual representations on his meager three sheets of paper and trying to advance his knowledge by linking the theories to his pre-existing PIDW lore knowledge.

As the sun sets and another disciple shows up to check Shen Yuan one last time before allowing him to return to the dorms, Shen Yuan feels as if his head is spinning with the amount of reading he has done.

“Everything seems to be alright,” the disciple says to Shen Yuan as she retracts her fingers from his wrist. “Shidi is well enough to return. Don’t forget to change your bandages with Wang-shixiong tomorrow after herbology class.”

“Understood,” Shen Yuan replies, somewhat excited to experience the class tomorrow. More PIDW plant lore and automatic intelligence point farm, what else can he wish for? “Thanking Shijie for the care.”

As Shen Yuan finishes adjusting the outer layers of his disciple robes, a notification from the System pops up.

【 Feature unlocked! ’Relationships tab’ is now accessible to User. 】

【 NPC ‘Wang Haoran’ added to ‘Acquaintances’ list. Open Relationships tab to see more information. 】

【 NPC ‘Han Lingyu’ added to ’Acquaintances’ list. Open Relationships tab to see more information. 】

The System, finally feeling like making Shen Yuan’s life more tolerable, has allowed Shen Yuan to not have to ask for Han Lingyu’s name — and also Wang-shixiong’s full name as well. It’s good to get to know others around him, so he can further improve his reputation and make things easier.

Shen Yuan lightly bows one time towards Han Lingyu as he turns around to leave and return to the dormitories. However, as soon as the door is closed, another notification pops up.

【 NPC ‘Han Lingyu’ is impressed by User’s determination to study while recovering. +5 reputation points. Current points: 65. 】

His sacrifice was not useless, at least. If it is possible to earn points by doing things unrelated to others, Shen Yuan assumes it will be easy to advance his level once he finds some people to interact with. Being nice and hard-working will be his personality, because who doesn’t like useful people who are kind to you?

There’s another problem, however. How is Shen Yuan supposed to return to the dormitories…?

Noticing an influx of disciples towards one direction, Shen Yuan decides to follow them in hopes he will at least end up in a central area of Qian Cao of sorts. Asking for the dormitory directions will absolutely raise some eyebrows, therefore it is safer to go with the flow and eventually end up there.

Quietly following behind a group of disciples too focused on talking amongst each other to notice Shen Yuan's continuous presence, he eventually ends up at the entrance of the patient's hall, which links up with Qian Cao's main hall that serves as a midway point to any ward. The disciples start walking towards the exit which leads to the outside, a cool breeze blowing against Shen Yuan's face as he leaves the main hall.

It is already dark outside, to Shen Yuan's surprise. Even while wearing clothes longer than he is used to, the weather is chilling enough to make Shen Yuan tremble. He sincerely hopes Qian Cao provides winter coats or something more warm, because these disciple robes aren't enough and Shen Yuan is pretty sure he doesn't have a single coin to his name.

【 Current balance: 0 gold taels, 0 silver taels, 0 bronze coins. 】

Thank you for the reminder I didn't ask for, Shen Yuan cries in his mind. Tomorrow will be a full day — not only will Shen Yuan have to figure out a strategy to finish this game as efficiently as he can, but he will also have to find a way to make money. Perhaps running some errands could help him with that…

More people join Shen Yuan and the group of disciples walking, each disciple already within a clique of their own. Cultivation novel or not, high school culture seems to be alive and thriving even in the nicer peaks such as Qian Cao. Shen Yuan can't even imagine how newcomers have it at Bai Zhan or Qing Jing — well, he does know how Qing Jing welcomes its newcomers and less privileged disciples, since it was one of the reason of Luo Binghe's revenge.

Eventually, they all reach another hall, the smell of recently cooked food steaming from the place as Shen Yuan's stomach pleads for something not as bland as the stew given to him during lunch. Remembering his own school experiences, Shen Yuan waits outside until everyone is seated in their places, leaving no risk of him being picked on for sitting in someone else's spot — and ruining his nonexistent reputation if he decides to answer that no one's name is scribed on the seat, therefore he can sit.

Shen Yuan's brief high school years were rough.

After five minutes pass by, Shen Yuan decides it is enough time for most people to have gathered in their places. He enters the hall, quietly waiting on the line so he can receive a bowl from the aunties behind the counter, and using the waiting time to observe the ambient.

It is a large hall, its architecture simpler than the main patient hall but still grandiose in its own way. It has to be, after all, since even with its size it can accommodate most disciples with little space left for anyone else. Shen Yuan wishes PIDW had gone more in-depth about simpler things like this, how many people reside in these peaks that seemed so lonely from Luo Binghe's perspective.

Knowing they are so alive and well-lived only makes Luo Binghe's reality even sadder, so it would be a good addition to the novel. Unfortunately, Airplane writes with his eyes closed and bank account open, so Shen Yuan isn't surprised.

As he carries the warm bowl of fried rice with chicken, Shen Yuan ends up sitting at the end of a table with no one by his side. The tables are long and can accommodate at least a dozen of disciples, so the only people sitting at the same table are on the opposite side to Shen Yuan's. He doesn't really know anyone, so it would be awkward to just waltz into someone's clique and pretend he isn't intruding.

Surprisingly, his arm doesn't hurt much. There's still some superficial wounds from the attack, which Shen Yuan expected would at least itch, but it seems like PIDW's medicine is pretty reliable even for smaller wounds. Shen Yuan can move it just fine if he doesn't exert force, which is enough for him to grind his intelligence skill. Surely he can earn one or two points by the end of the week?

"Already discharged, shidi?" a familiar voice suddenly brings Shen Yuan out of his thoughts, causing him to look up and meet Wang Haoran's smile. "Is it alright if this one sits here?"

"Ah, yes, of course!" Shen Yuan scrambles to answer, watching as the older boy laughs and sits in front of him with his own portion of fried rice. "Han-shijie let me leave a while ago, since I'm already feeling better…"

"That is great to hear," Wang Haoran replies, taking a bite of his food.

Without knowing what to say, silence permeates their conversation, and Shen Yuan focuses on eating his dinner. It isn't the greatest food he has ever eaten, but it is surely better than the stew given to him before, which is a win. The hall is loud with conversations between disciples as both Shen Yuan and Wang Haoran silently eat, which does make Shen Yuan wonder if Wang Haoran is a loner and this is why he chose to sit with him.

Whatever the case, Shen Yuan must use this opportunity to further his goals. As soon as he finishes chewing, he decides to ask something. "There's something this shidi needs to ask Wang-shixiong. Does shixiong know where I can get some books and articles to study?"

"Ah, has no one told you? Shidi can get some books from the library next to the teaching halls," Wang Haoran replies. "If shidi can't find the book he's looking for, your safest bet is to look in Qing Jing's library. Disciples from any peak can loan their books for a few days, but shidi will get in trouble if you return it late."

"I'll stick with Qian Cao's library for now," Shen Yuan mutters, already stressed just thinking about having to go to Qing Jing.

Wang Haoran laughs again at the comment. "I can't blame shidi for that. Those Qing Jing people can be difficult to deal with."

Shen Yuan laughs too, not really knowing how to continue the conversation. At least it turned out to be a useful way to gather information, since those small things are what Shen Yuan needs to blend into the crowd as best as he can. As he finishes his meal, Shen Yuan takes a look towards the other disciples; there's already some people leaving, probably going towards the dormitories.

Taking the empty bowl in his hands, Shen Yuan smiles at the other disciple in front of him. He must leave a good and kind impression, after all! “Apologies to shixiong, but this shidi wants to rest a little more before class tomorrow, so I’ll be leaving now. Thanking Wang-shixiong for having dinner with me!”

“Of course, don’t worry about me. May shidi have a good night,” Wang Haoran replies, smiling back as Shen Yuan turns to leave his empty bowl at the designated spot.

【 NPC ‘Wang Haoran’ thinks User is nice. +10 reputation points. Current points: 75. 】

As expected, Shen Yuan gained some reputation points. There’s only 25 points left for him to rank up, so it will be easy!

Shen Yuan leaves the dining hall with a smile in his face, following behind a group of disciples walking in a direction different to the one he arrived from the patient hall. Since there are no classes now, it must be where the dormitories are at, Shen Yuan reasons.

Thankfully, his prediction turned out to be correct. As the group walks through a stone path, they eventually arrive at a set of buildings, all connected through open pathways. Without a doubt it is the dormitories, as Shen Yuan watches disciples saying goodbye to each other and entering their respective rooms. The issue is knowing where his room is…

【 User’s room is room 8, An Xi pavilion. 】

“Couldn’t you have told me before?” Shen Yuan mutters as quietly as he can, feeling increasingly frustrated with the System.

【 User did not ask this System… (〃^ ᵕ ^〃) 】

One day he’s going to find a way to punch the System, Shen Yuan promises to himself. Instead of arguing with it, which would surely just leave him angrier, Shen Yuan walks around until finding the pavilion he’s assigned to.

It is a nice building, very similar to the others but well maintained. Shen Yuan opens the main door, finding himself in a long hallway filled with doors. It doesn’t take long for Shen Yuan to find his way to the 8th room, letting out a sigh of relief as he opens the door with no issues.

The room is devoid of many decorations, containing two simple beds, a wardrobe and two tables on opposite sides. Next to the beds there is a bedside table, which has a few books on top of it.

While he is planning to spend some time studying before going to sleep, Shen Yuan first sits on his bed to think. Tomorrow may give him more insight on how to proceed, but for now, his safest bet is to try to get closer to Mu Qingfang and see what happens. They are already on the same peak, which makes things infinitely easier for Shen Yuan, and gives him the opportunity to not get involved in the other characters’ messes.

His next steps are easy: go to every class possible, advance his cultivation, grind until he has decent stats and get a good reputation amongst his fellow disciples. Then, start getting closer to Mu Qingfang and see where that leads. That's enough for now, and as time passes, he will have to analyze the situation to make adjustments in his overall plan.

With no time to waste, Shen Yuan rises from the bed with newfound energy. Might as well look around the room he's going to spend the next few months in, right?

Shen Yuan takes a look inside the wardrobe, noticing there's an awfully small amount of clothes, all his size. Does he have no roommate? It would be great if that's the case. Thankfully, Shen Yuan finds a single winter coat within his clothes, one that has obviously been worn to its limit and will not stand another winter beyond this one. It's enough for Shen Yuan, who truthfully hopes he will be able to get out of this place in less than a year's time.

Shaking his head, Shen Yuan tries not to think of it. Feeling terrible about what happened will only slow him down, which will then delay his return to his life.

Closing the wardrobe's doors, Shen Yuan takes a peek at the books left on the bedside table. *Introduction to qi disorders, Listing of pollen-caused diseases and its symptoms,* and the one thing Shen Yuan has most been wanting, a cultivation manual. For all Shen Yuan wants to try out the manual as soon as possible, he knows it's better for him to advance his intelligence skill as fast as he can.

So, with a sigh, Shen Yuan takes both books to the table and lights the half-used candle, sitting on the wooden chair and preparing himself for a long night.

Chapter 3: do NOT have the same surname as the scum villain

Chapter Summary

Shen Yuan manages to slightly raise some skills after days of hard work. Whilst in the middle of studying, Shen Yuan is met with a situation no dating simulator could have prepared him for.

Chapter Notes

hello!!! how is everyone doing??
thank you guys so much for the kudos and comments eheheh i'm really happy to know there's a lot of people who have enjoyed the fic's concept!
hope u guys like this chapter <<3333

twt and bluesky: shiyooji

Shen Yuan is, as the kids says, locked in.

That is, he has spent the last four days barely doing anything outside of studying at every time possible, all in hopes of raising his intelligence and dexterity skill. During the remaining time in which Shen Yuan was not frying his eyes from reading in the dark with only a candle to give him light, he was attempting to meditate as the cultivation manual instructs. Shen Yuan is in a game with a cultivation setting, so of course he is going to play around with it, especially since he spawned with an early stage foundation establishment level!

It is during the meditation sessions that Shen Yuan finds out what the 'awareness' skill is used for. It is the stat defining the user's ability to notice the environment around them — the sounds, the smells, that kind of cultivator stuff. Shen Yuan has successfully grown the area of effect in which his awareness is active from 3 measly meters to… 5 meters.

If anyone tries to ambush Shen Yuan, he's 100% dying within seconds.

On the brighter side, his grind did result in his intelligence skill raising all the way to 2. Shen Yuan expected more from reading boring research papers and listening to hour-long seminars, but beggars can't be choosers. At least it made his experience getting another dexterity point much more bearable, and a win is a win on Shen Yuan's book.

Shen Yuan had to ask the System about how to earn some health points, which unfortunately just sums up to get beaten up until they raise. It explains why he woke up with an extra health

point he absolutely did not grant himself, but makes it much trickier for Shen Yuan to rise them further. Perhaps during training sessions?

…Training sessions in which Shen Yuan has not taken yet. Qian Cao's schedule is as chaotic as it gets, and since Shen Yuan is a new disciple, they are focusing on teaching him the basics of medicine before advancing into fights. First do no harm, then learn how to harm.

Letting out a sigh, Shen Yuan puts away the book in his hands, leaving it by his side on the fluffy grass — special curtesy of the secluded spot Shen Yuan had found by pure coincidence while looking for a place to study outside with enough shade. The tree he rests his body against is surely older than anyone in the peak, its roots visibly spreading far, just as the branches on top of Shen Yuan. Qian Cao is a nice peak to live on, if you ignore the disciples running around to fetch medicine and materials for others.

Which is why Shen Yuan found himself a nice little spot to study and contemplate his next steps. Unfortunately, Mu Qingfang has gone on a mission or something like that, and will come back in a few days; Shen Yuan didn't even get a chance to talk to the head disciple after waking up, and the System hasn't given him any main quests to complete either.

It left Shen Yuan with enough time to study and try out the task system — which has earned him 27 bronze coins so far, just from hauling stuff left and right around Qian Cao. Shen Yuan strategically refused any tests assigned outside his peak, since it could mean an encounter with another romantic option, and he's absolutely not ready for that yet.

Unfortunately, the tasks alone did not raise his reputation much. Now standing at an infuriating 98 points, Shen Yuan needs two points that he could earn by literally talking to anyone — which he pretends to do during dinner. Wang Haoran is a great reputation point farm, but unfortunately his shixiong had also gone on a mission, although it seems to be one different from Mu Qingfang's.

Looking up to the lively blue sky, Shen Yuan gathers some inner strength to continue studying. It's cold, and his cheap winter cape is barely doing its job, but it still feels better than being stuck inside a cramped room all day. Studying is not as bad as it could be; at least some of the books have really interesting subjects that were never mentioned in PIDW, but that doesn't take away from the fact Shen Yuan eventually gets a little tired and bored from all that reading.

Closing his eyes and breathing in, Shen Yuan feels energized enough to continue. So, as he opens his eyes, the last thing Shen Yuan expects to see is someone in front of him, staring. The welp he lets out is nothing short of embarrassing, but maybe that's what he gets for not putting his points into something useful like awareness, which would have prevented this from happening.

Shen Yuan is glad death by being scared shitless isn't an in-game feature.

"Ah, apologies, have I startled you?" the man asks, his face looking oddly familiar. One look through his robes and Shen Yuan quickly figures out why that is — these are Qiong Ding robes.

Whatever Yue Qingyuan is doing at the middle of Qian Cao's vast forests may only be known to Airplane.

"No, I just… This shidi was simply not expecting anyone to be here," Shen Yuan replies, recomposing himself as quickly as he can. Raising to his feet, Shen Yuan gives Yue Qingyuan his best polite smile. "May this shidi ask if Yue-shixiong needs any assistance? Does shixiong wish to meet with a physician?"

"There is no need," Yue Qingyuan replies, also smiling back politely. "This shixiong has already finished consulting with Jiang-shishu."

Then what are you doing here????? Shen Yuan really wants to say, but he knows it would be stupid to do so. The answer can be easily summarized to 'this is a otome harem game, of course one of the romantic options is here', so there is no reason for Shen Yuan to further stress himself thinking about it.

Still, Yue Qingyuan's answer does make Shen Yuan a little curious. Furrowing his brows, he asks. "Is Yue-shixiong feeling unwell?"

Yue Qingyuan shakes his head, his smile a little more awkward than before. "Ah, it is nothing that shidi needs to worry about. Just a scheduled visit, that is all."

Before Shen Yuan can think about how suspicious that sounds, the System decides to pop up with its annoying notification ping. Shen Yuan widens his eyes at the sudden quest, one listed under Yue Qingyuan's name.

【 New quest! Find out what Yue Qingyuan is hiding. Reward for completion: 1500 R-Points. Failure: loss of 3000 R-points, activation of punishment protocol. Does User wish to accept the quest? 】

【WARNING: Quest may affect the ending depending on actions taken by the User. 】

Shen Yuan has said he would refuse any quests that may be uncertain, but the reward for this one is pretty good — although the loss in case of failure would be very hard to deal with. From his quick look's through the shop, Shen Yuan has figured out he can exchange the R-Points for very useful things as well, like skill booster effects, money and many things that could make his life easier.

The System has said there's checkpoints, and although Shen Yuan can only use them when he dies, it is still a useful tool in case he accidentally fucks something up to the point of ending up dead. There's probably a very specific criteria for failure, and considering the quest revolves around Yue Qingyuan having a secret, Shen Yuan assumes it must be something like breaking the Qiong Ding Head Disciple's trust or not respecting his boundaries.

All of which are very easy things to not fuck up, so Shen Yuan decides to accept the quest. It may lead him into a Yue Qingyuan route, but that's what Mu Qingfang gets for being on a mission.

【 Quest accepted! Wishing User good luck (〃＞ᴗ＜〃) .ʻ.ʻ 】

Shen Yuan mentally gives the System the middle finger.

If Shen Qingqiu does tries to bother Shen Yuan, then he can simply act like a helpless protagonist being bullied by the villain. Complaining about him to Yue Qingyuan could be a bad idea, so Shen Yuan will probably have to endure some quiet suffering if Shen Qingqiu does turn out to be a jealous crazy ex type of character.

“Ah, this shidi understands,” Shen Yuan replies, not delving further into the subject, which seems to make Yue Qingyuan more comfortable. “If Yue-shixiong needs anything, this shidi is happy to help.”

Happy thinking about the points I’m going to earn!

Yue Qingyuan’s smile falters for a moment, a strange melancholic expression crossing through his face for seconds. Shen Yuan doesn’t have any time to wonder if he already fucked it up by trying to be nice, as Yue Qingyuan quickly smiles again, this time a little more sincere than before.

“Thanking Shen-shidi for his kindness,” the Qiong Ding Head Disciple answers. “Is shidi adapting well to the sect?”

Ah, of course the future sect leader, probably busy from day to night, remembers this one person he and other sect members rescued months ago and whom he hasn’t seen until now. Did Airplane borrow a soap opera writing guide for this? “Yes, Cang Qiong sect is a great place, and there’s so many things this one has learned since entering. Qian Cao’s library has so many books on herbology and beasts, although there’s not many on demonic beasts which is a little bit of a bummer, but this one is already saving money to buy the latest edition of the demonic beast compendium…”

“Qing Jing’s library has the latest edition of the compendium shidi is looking for,” Yue Qingyuan interrupts, catching Shen Yuan’s attention as he notices he may have spoken a little too much. “Their collection on demonic creatures is quite vast, if that interests shidi.”

Shen Yuan, with his face still burning out of embarrassment — somehow he had not gotten rid of his oversharing habit, even inside a game —, lets out an awkward laugh at the mention of Qing Jing. “Is that so? This shidi will make sure to visit Qing Jing’s library someday, then. Thanking shixiong for the tip.”

Yue Qingyuan nods, opening his mouth to say something before his eyes fixate on something above Shen Yuan. The head disciple furrows his brows, hesitating for a second before he slowly reaches his hand out — which absolutely freaks Shen Yuan out even if he doesn’t move, because he wasn’t expecting that at all. Why is Yue Qingyuan’s hand going towards his head…???

Something rustles against Shen Yuan’s ear as Yue Qingyuan’s hand retracts, a leaf on the head disciple’s grasp. “Apologies. There was something on shidi’s hair.”

“Ah, r- really?” Shen Yuan stutters, mentally berating himself for it. There might be a thousand or so thoughts circling his head like a typhoon, and half of those are cursing

Airplane for his lazy writing. Avoiding Yue Qingyuan's eyes, Shen Yuan quickly conjures a plan to get out of this situation. "Oh, it seems like I forgot my dissection class is about to start! Wishing Yue-shixiong a nice day!"

Shen Yuan sets off running before he can hear Yue Qingyuan's response.

It is only when he arrives at the path leading to Qian Cao's main area that Shen Yuan stops to think about what the hell has just happened. Ignoring the weird stares from other disciples (most likely because of his red face and messy hair from sprinting), Shen Yuan curses Airplane for a thousand lives. This may be PIDW, but Shen Yuan was not expecting such a cheesy move! When did that leaf even get in his hair?

How can anyone not be flustered when someone gets so close?! Shen Yuan's only hope before losing face was to make up an excuse, and it ended up not even being a believable one! How would a newbie like him have dissection classes? Shen Yuan doesn't even know how to maneuver a scalpel without a 10% chance of cutting himself in the process! The only thing he knows is doing basic sutures on fake tissue, and even those are quite messy.

Ok, Shen Yuan actually does know a fair bit about mixing and applying qi into medicine, but he's still not that good at it. Of course he would eventually learn something after studying for days without stopping for anything but basic needs, but that doesn't matter at the moment.

What matters is that Shen Yuan panicked so much he forgot his books back at the tree.

Yue Qingyuan should have left the area by now, right? Shen Yuan has been sprinting for a while, and the future sect leader must have something better to do rather than staying at the middle of nowhere in another peak. With these thoughts in mind, Shen Yuan sheepishly makes his way back to the tree, walking as slowly as he can to make sure Yue Qingyuan will be long gone by the time he arrives.

As Shen Yuan walks, another notification alert rings through his ears.

【 Yue Qingyuan thinks User is amusing. +20 Affection points added to 'Qiong Ding's Head Disciple, Yue Qingyuan'. +50 reputation points. User's reputation level is now 'Acknowledged Disciple'. More tasks have been unlocked. 】

Wait, wait, what?! Shen Yuan stops in his tracks, looking at the pop up in front of him with wide eyes. Yue Qingyuan is that OP to immediately grant Shen Yuan with 50 reputation points just for interacting with him? If Shen Yuan had known this earlier, he wouldn't have bothered to spend his lunch and dinner time trying to small talk other Qian Cao disciples!

Also, did Yue Qingyuan really like him that much…? 20 affection points is way more than what Shen Yuan got for interacting with Mu Qingfang. Did Shen Yuan accidentally get all the answers just right?

【 User is granted a special bonus for character 'Yue Qingyuan' not given to other players. Trigger: Surname, 30% appearance resemblance to character 'Shen Qingqiu'. 】

You've got to be shitting me. What the hell you mean I look like Shen Qingqiu??? This is literally my face!!!

【 Which has a 30% resemblance rate to character 'Shen Qingqiu' ᕙ ᵔ̑ ᵕ ᵔ̑ ᵔ ᕗ 】

Shen Yuan wants to scream, yet refrains from doing so as he doesn't want to lose his easy-earned reputation points. He continues to walk further into the forest path, deciding not to think about Yue Qingyuan's weird bonus and whatever that entails for Shen Yuan. Why is the man even a romantic option if he's forever stuck thinking about Shen Qingqiu?!

After a while of walking while trying not to cry or scream, Shen Yuan eventually arrives at the tree's location. As expected, his books are there, neatly organized on top of one another, something Shen Yuan is pretty sure he didn't do. Did Yue Qingyuan feel bad and organize them for him? Whatever happened, Shen Yuan doesn't want to know.

Kneeling to grab his books and get the hell out of there, Shen Yuan looks at the falling leaves and feels a sudden burst of embarrassment. It was the most cliché move anyone could pull, yet it made Shen Yuan's heart beat as if he had run a marathon. Of course, it's because Shen Yuan isn't very used to being around — and that physically close — to people, because such a cliché could never make him feel flattered.

It still makes Shen Yuan's face go as red as before, though. Surely it must be a suitable reaction to a socially isolated person who doesn't have many friends and has never dated before, of course he would get nervous whenever someone comes a little too close. It makes perfect sense.

Shen Yuan grabs one of the books and slams it against his head multiple times, trying to suppress whatever cringe-adjacent feeling going on in his heart at the moment. Would it feel less embarrassing if Shen Yuan hadn't literally run away?

"I'm so stupid…" Shen Yuan groans, flapping the book against his head one more time for good measure. At least the cover is hard enough to take a few hits.

Pull yourself together, Shen Yuan reminds himself as he sighs and stares at the sky for a few seconds. The sun is already setting, which means his first shift at Qian Cao's patient ward is starting soon. There's no time left to cringe at his own mistakes, so Shen Yuan breathes in and raises from the ground, carrying the books so he can return them to the library.

As he leaves the area, another notification from the System gets Shen Yuan's attention.

【 +10 affection points added to character 'Yue Qingyuan'. 】

Shen Yuan looks at the notification twice, wondering if he read it wrong. Yue Qingyuan has already left. Was it a bug?

【 System informs User that no bugs have been found! 】

Huh, weird. None of Shen Yuan's business though. Maybe it's just something related to the bonus the System has mentioned before, which does leave Shen Yuan feeling a little annoyed.

He doesn't look like Shen Qingqiu at all! Not that he has seen the scum villain IRL (or should he say in-in-game?), but Shen Yuan obviously doesn't look like him. Yue Qingyuan is just fixated on his (maybe) ex and is projecting it on Shen Yuan.

Continuing his way back to the main path, Shen Yuan strolls leisurely and takes the opportunity to observe the nature around him. Qian Cao is a truly beautiful place, its green scenery making anyone feel invigorated just by looking at it — a great place for someone in need of healing.

Shen Yuan is happy to be able to experience it from the other side, as the caretaker instead of the sick person. It may be temporary, but he will not forget the freedom it gives him — how long had it been since he last took a stroll without immediately panting for air or feeling like his joints were about to disintegrate?

If only Shen Yuan could have the same in real life.

As he reaches the main path and eventually finds the library building, Shen Yuan takes one last look at the books to make sure he didn't damage them. Wiping off any remaining grass stuck on the cover, he places the books back in their respective shelves, silently looking through the rows to figure out what to borrow next.

System, is there any skill requirement for any quests I have now?

【 Skill requirements found for main quest 'Become an Inner Disciple'. Requirements: Dexterity lvl 5, Intelligence lvl 4, Awareness lvl 2. One Special Skill required. 】

Letting out a sigh, Shen Yuan predicts his next few days will be just as filled with endless studying and meditating. At least it won't take long to reach level 2 of the Awareness skill, since Shen Yuan already has one from his experimental meditation sessions. The other skills will take long to reach, however… And what about the special skill? What is that even supposed to mean?

【 Special Skills are specific areas of knowledge the User holds. A Special Skills is only earned once upon mastering a subject. 】

【 User has been granted 90% progress in the Special Skills 'Demonic Zoology' and 'Herbology' due to User's existing knowledge. 】

This might have been the first good thing that the System has granted Shen Yuan, honestly. Yue Qingyuan's bonus doesn't count solely due to the weird vibes it gives Shen Yuan.

So, he should just study herbology until he gets the skill, same for the demonic zoology skill. Shen Yuan decides to go first with herbology, as the other would require him to visit Qing Jing's library sooner than he wishes to, and he's absolutely not ready to meet the scum villain yet.

They have a complete collection on it, though… The amount of lore present there…

Shen Yuan shakes his head, as it is useless to think of it now. He can ask a few disciples about Qing Jing's library later, and maybe someone will know the most optimal time to go there. For now, he should focus on increasing his dexterity and intelligence skill, the former in which he will be able to practice tonight during his shift. It is tiresome work, unfortunately. Shen Yuan wishes there was a way to earn the points quicker rather than grinding his bones to the tune of overworked disciples…

【 User can acquire '2x Skill Gain' effect from our R-Points shop! 】

Ah, this is a mobile game. Shen Yuan should have expected the solution to his problems being micro-transactions. How much of his soul does it cost now?

【 User can acquire a 3 hour long '2x Skill Gain' effect for a bargain price of 150 R-Points! Current R-Points: 50. 】

That's… Better than Shen Yuan expected, honestly. It would still be a hassle to get those 150 points, but it would surely be worth it. Should Shen Yuan wait until Mu Qingfang arrives from his mission to try and get some R-Points out of the head disciple? Yue Qingyuan would probably be a reliable source as well, but the only quest Shen Yuan has been assigned looks like something that might take a while to complete.

Ah, whatever. It might be more worth it to look into it tomorrow and formulate a plan. There's another question he hadn't bothered to ask the System about yet, and his time before his shift starts is running out. It is quite embarrassing that Shen Yuan forgot to ask the most basic question ever, and he prefers to blame it on the frantic studying schedule he is currently following.

How do the affection points work?

【 Affection Points are gained upon positive interactions with characters labeled 'love interests'. User will receive an Affection Point rate penalty if two or more characters reach Affection Level 4, unless specific criteria is met. 】

【 Affection Levels

Level 1, 0-100 points: Blossoming Connection

Level 2, 100-200 points: Growing Endearment

Level 3, 200-300 points: Established Affection

Level 4, 300-400 points: Passionate Devotion

Level 5, 400-500 points: Kindred Souls 】

That is way more complicated than it should be, but Shen Yuan can't do much but sigh and ponder how the hell to reach 500 points with someone. Yue Qingyuan may not be that difficult, but something about him tells Shen Yuan it will be more trouble than it is worth — maybe that massive red flag regarding his supposed resemblance to Shen Qingqiu.

However, he has only earned 5 points with Mu Qingfang so far. Should Shen Yuan be more straightforward in his approach? He didn't have much time to talk to the head disciple so far, but maybe things will be better when he returns to Qian Cao.

Another option is to seek out the other characters and see how it goes. Shen Yuan is hesitant to try it out, but if he does it with restraint and only with the intention to gather enough R-Points to raise his skills faster, then maybe Shen Yuan can figure something out without getting dragged into difficult plots.

Raising from his comfortable spot curled up against a corner of the library, Shen Yuan doesn't feel as stressed as he expected. If he doesn't seek trouble, then he will be ok. Just complete the main tasks and raise his skills faster so he isn't as useless as he is now.

It isn't like he's constrained by time, so Shen Yuan will take it easy.

【 WARNING: Main Quest 'Become an Inner Disciple' has a completion time limit of two months. Upon failure to complete the task, User will be subjected to the punishment protocol. Time remaining: 56 days, 5hrs, 32 min. 】

Shen Yuan stops dead in his tracks, mouth agape as he looks towards the annoyingly bright pop-up window with nothing short of shock in his eyes. Since when did he have a time limit?! Literally, there was nothing mentioned about something like this, so how can the System just throw it on his face casually like this?

【 User did not ask… ᓚ ᘛ ˊ ᵕ ˋ ᘚ ɞ 】

If Shen Yuan could, he would unleash the most vile curses he can think of towards the System, but that would only cause the other disciples to think he's crazy. It is the definition of a scam, and once Shen Yuan returns to his world, he will make sure to get back at Airplane for putting him in this mess.

Two months is absolutely nothing! Shen Yuan knows there is a curve of difficulty to the skills, as he himself has noticed his progress becomes slower once he reaches level 2. Without the effect, Shen Yuan is sure he won't be able to make it — especially since he's not sure how long it will take to acquire the special skills. Either way, Shen Yuan is absolutely cooked unless he finds a way to farm R-Points.

Shen Yuan stomps his way to the patient ward, fuming and panicking about his predicament at the same time.

Chapter 4: do NOT resemble the scum villain

Chapter Summary

> Shen Yuan has his first emergency shifts at Qian Cao; and once he sees Mu Qingfang is in one of them, Shen Yuan knows this won't be a peaceful shift.

Chapter Notes

> hello!! how is everyone doing?? sorry for the late update, i thankfully finished my entrance exams and have spent the last few days playing games to relax LMAO but anyways, it is here!!!
> thank you all for the kind comments and the kudos, it really makes me happy to see people are liking the fic ehehehe <33 i hope u guys enjoy the chapter!
>
> twt and bluesky: shiyooji

Shen Yuan's first night shift was surprisingly calm.

Since his shift encompassed dinner time, Shen Yuan did not have the time to enjoy his newly gained reputation level, but he did have the chance to spend six hours running errands for more experienced disciples and crafting basic, low-grade medicine for less severe cases. The shift from 6 in the evening to midnight was less agitated than he expected, which probably means most Bai Zhan disciples are out in hunts or too busy punching trees or whatever they do at Bai Zhan — or at least that's what Han Lingyu said.

Han Lingyu turned out to be a good shift colleague, as she didn't get (overly) annoyed with Shen Yuan's inexperience and helped him whenever it was needed. His shijie is quiet but not necessarily cold, which makes her the perfect partner for socially awkward Shen Yuan who doesn't know what to say.

Also, Han-shijie knows how to deal with embarrassing situations, which is something Shen Yuan will have to learn soon. Still, he's not sure what he should say if another Qing Jing disciple arrives saying his private parts feel as if they are on fire, which is why Shen Yuan said nothing and Han Lingyu ended up having to deal with the situation herself.

Surprisingly, the Qing Jing disciple was very obviously not Shen Qingqiu. He seemed to be some inner disciple, if Shen Yuan's memory of Qing Jing's robes is correct — and Shen Qingqiu is supposed to be the current head disciple. Besides, PIDW did mention that Shen

Qingqiu rarely went to Qian Cao even when having qi deviations, so it will be unlikely for Shen Yuan to meet him here.

Still, the weird look the Qing Jing disciple gave him was enough to make Shen Yuan scramble to get Han Lingyu as fast as possible.

Thankfully Han Lingyu did not get too annoyed at Shen Yuan's inability to control his expressions, and even told him he should have a class regarding it soon. Qian Cao is truly a fancy place for it to offer acting classes for upcoming physicians…

The situation, as embarrassing as it was, did take Shen Yuan's mind out of the whole ordeal with Yue Qingyuan. It was a chore to block any memories from resurfacing while crafting medicine, and to avoid his face going red whenever attending to someone. Han Lingyu's comments regarding the amount of Qing Jing, Bai Zhan and (somehow) Ku Xing disciples who come seeking STD treatments did make Shen Yuan laugh half of his worries away, and even caused him to get more reputation points from Han Lingyu.

At least the shift ended peacefully, and Shen Yuan went to sleep feeling alright.

Once morning came, Shen Yuan followed his routine as perfectly as possible — going to all his classes, meditating for an hour, talking to NPCs during lunch and picking some new books to study. Some NPC he can't recall the name mentioned that Mu Qingfang had arrived from his mission, and *surprise,* would be taking this night shift; which Shen Yuan also had to take!

Surely there will be many moments to interact with the head disciple, or so Shen Yuan thought. As it is an otome game, of course nothing is a coincidence! Shen Yuan is already preparing himself mentally for whatever bullshit cliché will be thrown at him this time. Will it be slipping and accidentally falling on the poor overworked head disciple? Or maybe making a minuscule cut on his finger and having the Mu Qingfang, future best doctor of the realm wrap it for him?

Whatever it is, Shen Yuan just wants the R-Points that come with a potential quest. Surely, after almost a week inside this place, there must be a quest Mu Qingfang will give him or something to give Shen Yuan some virtual currency. Right?

Shen Yuan makes sure to tie his hair a little better today, adding a little green ribbon as decoration. There's nothing on Qian Cao's dress code that says Shen Yuan can't use ribbons, he just can't go into his shift with his hair down. Which is honestly fair, at least xianxia people have a sense of hygiene and proper hospital cleanliness. They even wash their hands!

Tidying his robes one last time before setting off to the patient ward, Shen Yuan takes a quick look at the small bronze mirror on his desk. For someone who has been stressed 24/7 since arriving, Shen Yuan must admit he looks pretty good — if it were him in his world, one night of bad sleep is more than enough to make the deepest dark circles appear under his eyes. His skin is even glowing, somehow! Truly, the beauty stat works wonders for Shen Yuan's skin.

Leaving the dormitories, Shen Yuan calmly walks towards the main building. Mu Qingfang better be prepared for Shen Yuan's absolute lack of social skills!

Greeting the disciples leaving their shifts and walking towards the dining hall, Shen Yuan starts getting a little nervous as he approaches Qian Cao's main hospital building. What if he says something stupid that makes Mu Qingfang dislike him? That man is his ticket to a quick, easy route, so Shen Yuan absolutely can't fumble this. Would it work if he acts kind and politely as he has, or does Shen Yuan need to be bolder in his approach?

Just the thought of making a move is enough to make Shen Yuan mentally whine in cringe as his face turns red. He's a straight man, as straight as they come, how can he do something like flirt with a man?! It's one thing if they are the ones flirting with him, but Shen Yuan absolutely can't take any initiatives.

The only time Shen Yuan had to deal with any romantic situation was that one time he was still in high school, during his second year. A girl approached him and asked if he wanted to kiss — and yes, they did not know each other at all. Shen Yuan, absolutely baffled by the situation and riddled by a *'can't say no to anyone'* complex, nodded and ended up with his first kiss stolen. Apparently it was a bet between the girl and her friends that she could walk up to any boy and they would agree to kiss her, so she probably picked the most 'otaku virgin nerd' looking guy she could find.

Shen Yuan can't even be mad, since the girl's plan did work. Maybe that Luo Binghe keychain he had in his backpack wasn't helping either.

As Shen Yuan shakes his thoughts off, he enters the main hall and notices it is very serene once again. Perhaps the night shift will be easy once again, and Shen Yuan will have a lot of time to figure out how to gain affection points with Mu Qingfang.

Entering the staff room, Shen Yuan is immediately greeted by the head disciple's face as Mu Qingfang opens the door the same moment Shen Yuan does, causing him to hit his head against the head disciple's chin (why is he so tall- no, why is Shen Yuan so small in-game???), wincing in pain before noticing what is going on.

"Apologies to Mu-shixiong for this shidi's carelessness," Shen Yuan says, rubbing his forehead in hopes it will stop aching. Maybe half of his headache comes from the fact Shen Yuan just had the scare of his life.

"There is no need to apologize, Shen-shidi. It is this shixiong who rushed without looking," Mu Qingfang replies, apparently not in any pain due to the accidental bumping. He looks down with worry, furrowing his brows at Shen Yuan. "Is shidi alright? Shidi's face seems a little red…"

"I'm alright!" Shen Yuan quickly replies, maybe a tad louder than he should. This game always manages to surprise Shen Yuan in the worst ways possible — how was he supposed to expect bumping into Mu Qingfang first thing into his shift? "This shidi's allergies must be acting up. Nothing to worry about!"

With that, Shen Yuan rushes into the room without looking back once, already feeling his face head up once again due to his own stupidity. What allergies would he have when most of the flowers have withered as the weather grows colder? At least in Shanghai he could claim

the fine dust was irritating his nose regardless of the season, but the same excuse will obviously not work here.

Mu Qingfang stands there for a few seconds before nodding and walking away to whatever he was supposed to do before bumping into Shen Yuan. A System notification appears in front of Shen Yuan.

【 Mu Qingfang is confused but thinks User is cute. +10 Affection points added to 'Qian Cao's Head Disciple, Mu Qingfang'. 】

The grind never ends, Shen Yuan thinks as he remembers he needs 101 points for the second affection level. How is he supposed to do this quickly? Shen Yuan can't even handle holding normal conversations for longer than two minutes, let alone romance someone.

Whatever, he can figure it out later. Right now, Shen Yuan needs to focus on reading the schedule to find out where exactly he will be working today — usually, it is easier to deal with long-staying patients since Shen Yuan only needs to mix simple medicines and give them, along with other menial tasks that the inner disciples don't take.

Just his luck that today Shen Yuan is assigned to work at the emergency ward. Yes, Shen Yuan also had a shift at the emergency ward yesterday, but it was one of those rare days in which nothing really happened, but Mu Qingfang's presence makes Shen Yuan wary of what might happen just because of 'plot reasons'.

After washing his hands on the recently-brought basin of water, Shen Yuan makes sure the light cloth hat in his head is properly secured so he can start his shift. Something tells Shen Yuan today will not be as peaceful as yesterday, perhaps because outside of his encounter with Yue Qingyuan (that wasn't even that bad, considering how trashy things can get in PIDW for the sake of drama), nothing really happened. Shen Yuan spent his days without much commotion, and that worries him a little.

What sort of cultivation setting has such a peaceful beginning?

A bell rings through the hallway, indicating the shift change. Shen Yuan sighs and begrudgingly leaves the staff room, walking towards the emergency center whilst praying for every entity he has ever heard about in his measly mortal life.

Once arriving at the ward, Shen Yuan notices it is fairly empty for the time of the day. Perhaps the disciples on the shift before had already dealt with most situations and left no one for the new shift disciples to deal with, which Shen Yuan is very glad for.

Most of the disciples scaled for this shift are already there, including Mu Qingfang and Wang Haoran, who gives Shen Yuan a smile as the younger enters the room. Shen Yuan briefly considers sticking with Wang Haoran for an easy, stress-free shift, but the temptation of getting more R-Points is enough to make Shen Yuan follow his original plan.

As a lower-ranking disciple, Shen Yuan's tasks are the most boring and annoying ones. Organizing the mixing table, replacing any used medicine, checking inventory and other stuff a person would not see a protagonist doing in a medical show. Thankfully it is not Shen

Yuan's cleaning duty day, because it would be awkward to flirt with someone just after cleaning up blood, puke and other liquids.

"Shen-shidi," a voice behind Shen Yuan says as he finishes replacing the low-grade pain relief medicine, making him turn around startled.

"Wang-shixiong," Shen Yuan greets, smiling back at the older disciple. Maybe this is a great time to get some extra reputation points… "Does shixiong need something?"

Give me a task for some easy reputation points and coins, I really need to buy that bracelet on the System shop with a learning speed boost of 0.2!

Looking awkwardly to the side for a moment, Wang Haoran speaks up. "There's something this shixiong has been meaning to ask shidi, if shidi does not mind."

Shen Yuan's curiosity flares up with how awkward his usually nice shixiong looks, and he nods for the older disciple to continue. Is it a big, hard task? Shen Yuan hasn't gotten any of those yet, so he's not sure how they usually go, but surely it cannot be anything that difficult to accomplish-

"Is Shen-shidi related to the Qing Jing head disciple?"

The fleeting glee of a full wallet and higher reputation rank is completely taken away from Shen Yuan as he stares blankly towards Wang Haoran. Did he really approach Shen Yuan in the middle of their shift just to ask him if he's related to public enemy #1 Shen Qingqiu?! What is wrong with Cang Qiong disciples' eyesights? There is no way in hell they actually look that alike!

Han Lingyu is now Shen Yuan's favorite martial sibling!

Accidentally sighing, Shen Yuan answers as he picks up the empty basket from the ground to put it away. "This shidi is pretty sure he and Shen-shixiong are not related in any way. It is only our surnames that are coincidentally the same."

Nodding with understanding, Wang Haoran opens his mouth to answer but is interrupted by a sudden voice calling out.

"Wang-shidi, there are a few herbs that need to be collected at the second greenhouse," Mu Qingfang interferes, not leaving his spot near the table nor looking up as he speaks. "Can shidi bring them?"

Everyone in the ward knows it is not really a question but an order — if the head disciple tells you to do something, you do it, even if it is a task below your level such as it is for Wang Haoran. Some disciples exchange glances, but refrain from saying anything, as does Shen Yuan. Wang Haoran annoyedly sighs and mouths something under his breath, muttering a small apology towards Shen Yuan before turning around to fetch the herbs.

Shen Yuan is both sort of grateful for Mu Qingfang's odd request towards Wang Haoran and feeling a little pity for the other disciple. Yes, Shen Yuan was annoyed at the question, but

Shen Yuan knows how far the greenhouses are from the main wards and how long it takes to fetch something from there — Shen Yuan has been there before, unfortunately.

It makes Shen Yuan a little confused on why Wang Haoran specifically had to gather the herbs. Maybe because all outer disciples are already preoccupied with their tasks and the older disciple had finished his?

Whatever it is, Shen Yuan doesn't think about it deeply. It already annoys him that apparently it's not just Yue Qingyuan who sees the similarity, so Shen Yuan can't blame it on the Qiong Ding head disciple trying to project his frenemy into Shen Yuan.

Why do people think I look like him… Shen Yuan questions, sighing for the thousandth time in the day as he puts away the basket.

"Has someone else asked Shen-shidi before?" Mu Qingfang suddenly asks, scaring the hell out of Shen Yuan who didn't even know the head disciple was behind him — much less that he was thinking out loud!

Turning to face the head disciple, Shen Yuan hesitantly shakes his head. "No one else has directly… asked this shidi, but now the odd looks coming from some disciples are starting to make sense."

Unfortunately, Shen Yuan can't say an entity living in his head told him about it, much less about Yue Qingyuan obviously being aware of the supposed resemblance. Honestly, he hadn't expected anyone to be brazen enough to ask, even when Shen Qingqiu and Shen Yuan share a surname (another unfortunate coincidence), yet Wang Haoran did anyway.

May as well ask Shen Yuan if he's related to the Qing Jing Peak Lord, since they also have the same surname!

"I see," Mu Qingfang replies, giving the other a look of sympathy, which Shen Yuan absolutely thinks he deserves. Imagine being related to Shen Qingqiu! "Apologies if this shixiong has asked something uncomfortable to shidi."

"It is no issue," Shen Yuan answers, mostly out of politeness. Yes, it is an issue, but Mu Qingfang is his senior and Shen Yuan desperately needs some R-Points. However, this might be the only opportunity to ask someone who doesn't particularly loathe Shen Qingqiu… "Does this shidi resemble Shen-shixiong that much?"

Mu Qingfang seems a little taken aback by the question, but obliges nevertheless. Maybe he didn't expect Shen Yuan to ask? "Not by much. Shen-shidi's features are much softer than Shen-shixiong. One could, however, presume a far relation between both."

"I'm pretty sure we're not cousins or something," Shen Yuan annoyedly mutters, mostly to himself. "Not like I have any family now…"

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Shen Yuan freezes in place. He didn't really mean to say it out loud — hell, he didn't really want to *think* about it either. It is one of the forbidden

topics in his mind, locked away behind copious amounts of humor for the sake of Shen Yuan's sanity while he's stuck in this shitty game.

Why now, talking to another character, of all times?

"Shen-shidi…" the head disciple replies with a pitiful tone, which doesn't help Shen Yuan's panic by much.

It might be the only barrier Shen Yuan absolutely needs to keep — this isn't his life and it will never be. At some point he will return, so there is no need to make his trip back home take more time by distracting himself with it. The Shen Yuan in Proud Immortal Demon Romance is nothing more than a Mary-Sue with shit stats and cliché backstory, nothing more than a blank slate made for players to identify with as they romance attractive people.

These people do not and will never know his true family; because they don't exist in this Shen Yuan's life. It is fruitless to talk about something which does not exist and is not completely gone, since Shen Yuan will eventually go back and continue his life as usual, pester his parents for extra candy whenever his doctors say it's bad, annoy his brothers for them to drive him around and go outside, fight with his little sister over which protagonist is the best and sexiest — it will all return, eventually.

There is no need to mourn something which is not completely gone.

"Apologies for the unnecessary remarks," Shen Yuan mutters, grabbing a basin from the shelves. One of his tasks is retrieving water, anyways, so might as well do it now and get away from the conversation altogether. "This shidi has a few tasks to accomplish, so I'll be going-"

As Shen Yuan turns and faintly feels fingers brushing against his wrist, there's not enough time for him to react before the emergency ward's door is slammed open and the hand retracts from his. Shen Yuan knows it was Mu Qingfang, but the moment to ponder what in the otome game was happening will have to wait until after they deal with the panting disciple being carried by another disciple.

From the looks of it, both are inner Bai Zhan disciples. The panting disciple holds himself against the other's shoulder, as if not being able to walk properly — which is comprehensible, considering the disciple's robes are all covered in blood that flows out of his eyes, mouth and ears as if it was water.

Mu Qingfang spares no time as he assesses the situation. "Chen Xi, start circling the patient's qi. Du Jianyu and Yan Huan, gather the ingredients for Frostdew flower stabilizer, and the rest stay on standby!"

All Qian Cao disciples nod, including Shen Yuan. His previous worries are all but gone now — from the look in Mu Qingfang's eyes and all of the seniors, this isn't an 'easy to deal with' qi deviation. The Bai Zhan disciple is clearly going through a rough time, rougher than the few qi deviations Shen Yuan had the misfortune of seeing; it is clear they must solve this immediately, or else this disciple could die.

Shen Yuan stands next the other disciples, waiting for orders as Chen Xi cautiously approaches the patient, who still holds onto the other disciple. Anyone in the room can feel the erratic qi fluctuations; Shen Yuan is feeling a tad nervous knowing this is a game that thrives on dramatic moments.

“Ji Jue, don’t you dare die on me!” the other disciple cries, desperately looking towards Chen Xi. “Please, save my shixiong!”

Chen Xi nods, reaching her hand with utmost caution towards Ji Jue’s wrist. Upon sensing her, the Bai Zhan disciple snaps his head upwards, looking first at her and then around the room with bloodshot eyes. Most disciples hold their breath and try not to move as to not startle the patient — they don’t know what sort of qi deviation he could have, or how violent it can get.

Mu Qingfang takes a glance back at the patient, quickly mixing the ingredients he had requested but not interfering at the moment. Qian Cao does have a policy of not using force unless completely necessary, which is surprisingly progressive considering they are in… Tang? Song? Maybe even Ming? Or maybe a fusion of those dynasties’ era. In any case, sedatives are last resource, even if the patient starts getting visibly agitated.

Shen Yuan breathes in as quietly as he can. He can hear his heart beating quickly, his hands trembling a little. It’s the first time he has witnessed this sort of emergency, maybe in his life. Is this how doctors feel during their first serious cases? Shen Yuan is more like a background assistant, yes, but he could still accidentally fuck something up and make things infinitely harder for everyone. He looks towards the Bai Zhan disciple with both pity and a little bit of fear, wishing this will be over soon.

Then, Ji Jue’s bloodshot eyes lock onto Shen Yuan’s face, his features turning from agitated to furious. That’s when Shen Yuan knows this is why Mu Qingfang is doing this random emergency ward shift.

An eery chime echoes through Shen Yuan’s ears, akin to the sound of when something horrible is about to happen in a movie or game.

【New scene of ‘Ji Jue’s Qi Deviation’ unlocked! Trigger: 30% semblance rate to character Shen Qingqiu. Due to the difficulty increase of 250%, a new checkpoint has been made.】

In a blink of an eye, both the poor Bai Zhan disciple who brought Ji Jue to Qian Cao and Chen Xi are thrown to the side with a swift motion — the two people standing on the way, of course. Shen Yuan knows he’s absolutely fucked once he quickly reads the System’s notification, and at the same time he has no clue what to do; it isn’t even his fault! Even worse, it seems like Mu Qingfang was caught off-guard too.

“Shen!” Ji Jue growls, pure loathing in his voice as he tackles Shen Yuan to the ground, something gleaming in his hand. “You won’t dare humiliate me anymore!”

Widening his eyes in fear and pain, Shen Yuan wonders what the hell he can do. His head is spinning, he’s pretty sure his wrist is already broken and maybe some ribs too — even if this

is a game, it feels just like real life, and Shen Yuan really hopes this will end soon. It is clear Ji Jue is aiming for a kill, and if no one acts fast, Shen Yuan will die; but what is he even supposed to do?! That's his face he was born with!

This is an otome game, so surely, Mu Qingfang will be the one to somehow tackle the Bai Zhan disciple trying to kill Shen Yuan before he actually does anything drastic, without a doubt! Mu Qingfang is just a little startled but will soon come to his senses and save Shen Yuan's zero strength stats ass, because Shen Yuan can't use the excuse of brushing off the pain and terror because it's a game for any longer.

Then, a searing pain ripples through Shen Yuan's abdomen, making him gasp as he looks down to find a dagger, which is quickly pulled out and raised to the air once again.

Unlike what people say in the movies, the pain doesn't stop as Shen Yuan's vision grows blurrier and it feels as if someone is slamming a pan against his ears. It only grows more and more unbearable, as if his insides are completely aware of every single millimeter of tissue that is being ripped apart by the dagger, sending waves of shock through his body constantly.

Shen Yuan isn't sure if he's screaming, crying or both.

At some point, Ji Jue is knocked away, although it is tricky for Shen Yuan to tell when exactly that happens. Everything is a blur, going in slow motion and fast at the same time. There are people talking — or screaming, maybe —, but at this point, even in his disoriented and shocked state, Shen Yuan already knows he's dying. It would be better if it happens quickly, although he's unsure if it will be like that; the other disciples are probably trying really hard to keep him alive right now.

In the end, death isn't quick nor peaceful; Shen Yuan breathes his last in pure agony.

Chapter 5: do NOT get traumatized by dying horribly and coming back to life

Chapter Notes

> hello!! omg y'all i'm so sorry for the long wait, i sort of had writers block during the festivities… tragic but at least now i've finally managed to write a full chapter after a month!!!!
> i hope u guys enjoy it eheheh <33
> twt and bluesky: shiyooji

Shen Yuan gasps as he opens his eyes, finding himself in the same position as he was just before Ji Jue lunged at him.

The System's notification is in front of him, the bell-like chime echoes through his ears once again. Shen Yuan doesn't waste precious seconds reading whatever the system is saying; he immediately dodges to the side, barely avoiding Ji Jue's flying figure that ends up grabbing nothing but air. Disciples scream in surprise and reach forward to restrain the Bai Zhan disciple.

No time is given for Shen Yuan to celebrate, as the Bai Zhan disciple furiously looks around the room until finding his target once again. Ignoring the gut-wrenching ghost pain in his abdomen, Shen Yuan knows he has no time to get a weapon or a needle, so he must do with what he has — his own body and a determination not to die again.

Ji Jue's effortlessly dodges the disciples trying to calm him down, lunging furiously at Shen Yuan who positions himself in front of a sturdy wooden cabinet. He only has his chance — if he fucks this up, then Ji Jue's might end up killing him again.

As the Bai Zhan disciple approaches, Shen Yuan dodges at the last second and lets Ji Jue hit the cabinet head-first.

It immediately breaks into pieces, sending flying pieces of wood and glass through the room. It isn't enough to knock out Ji Jue, of course, but it is enough to stun him for just the right time for Mu Qingfang to strike one of his pressure points. The Bai Zhan disciple immediately lumps unconscious, bleeding more severely than before but still alive.

Most importantly, rendering him unable to murder Shen Yuan again.

Shen Yuan lets out a breath, or a gasp — honestly, it's hard to tell, and he couldn't care less about it. Many Qian Cao disciples run to his side, asking too many questions at the same time that Shen Yuan's brain isn't capable of processing at the moment; the only thing he knows is that he's safe and that he didn't die.

At some point, Shen Yuan knows he's on the ground, although not pinned down by Ji Jue like before. He probably slid down or fell; whichever option doesn't matter at the moment. Shen Yuan knows there are people around him asking if he's ok, yet nothing comes out of his mouth, as if he physically cannot speak — or maybe he doesn't want to, he's not sure.

He has done it. Shen Yuan survived, so it should be all that matters. He has not died nor has he been injured, at least not in this timeline or whatever it could be called; so why does it still ache as if he can feel Ji Jue pushing the knife deeper and deeper?

Shen Yuan didn't die. He hasn't been injured. It has not happened here, therefore whatever he saw before going back to the checkpoint *isn't real,* because this is a video game and he hasn't actually died, even if it felt like it. Shen Yuan repeats these thoughts inside his own mind like a mantra, yet it does not change anything as he expected it to.

Shouldn't surviving feel more rewarding?

A bell chimes through Shen Yuan's ears, the sound gradually becoming less drowned out by his repeating thoughts. It is the System, without a doubt, annoyingly chiming as if asking for Shen Yuan to cover his ears — but he knows the sound won't go away if he does so.

Slowly raising his head, Shen Yuan looks up from the safety of his knees shielding his view, finding a pair of eyes right in front of him.

"Shen-shidi," Mu Qingfang carefully says, trying to elicit a reaction out of him. Shen Yuan looks at the head disciple without much interest. It feels like he's asleep yet awake at the same time. "The patient has been taken to another ward. Does shidi want to return to the dormitories?"

Shen Yuan shakes his head. What difference would it make?

Another bell rings through Shen Yuan's ears.

"Then would shidi like to come with this shixiong to the break room? A calmer atmosphere would do well for Shen-shidi," the Qian Cao Head Disciple says, not averting his worried gaze for a second.

People are whispering, Shen Yuan notices. It is no surprise that all eyes are on him, yet it feels uncomfortable to know people are speculating about him and what has happened; a murmur about his home village being destroyed, another mutter about Shen Qingqiu, then a hushed remark about semblances.

Maybe Mu Qingfang's idea isn't so bad, after all. Shen Yuan nods.

Mu Qingfang's worried expression seems to ease by a fraction. "Very well, then."

Gathering the strength required to stand up, Shen Yuan slowly pulls himself up by using the wall as a support. It feels as if the world is trying to pull him back to the floor by any means necessary, yet Shen Yuan manages to win against it — it isn't the first time he has felt this force pulling him down, and he has long since learned how to overpower it.

It doesn't feel exactly like the fatigue Shen Yuan was used to, but it feels similar enough.

Barely standing upright, a sudden bout of dizziness makes Shen Yuan reach for support; a hand quickly reaches to support his weight while Shen Yuan simply follows wherever Mu Qingfang starts guiding him. Another bell rings.

The whispers continue as Shen Yuan's mind slowly clears, the warmth from the head disciple's body becoming more noticeable as his senses try to attune to the ambient. Everything smells like blood, and even if Shen Yuan knows it is not his own this time, it nevertheless sends a shiver down his spine.

A door opens, and the ambient changes. *We must be in the hallway,* Shen Yuan concludes as newer voices start to gasp and talk in hushed secrecy. They stop in front of an opened door, only for Mu Qingfang to sigh and continue walking and guiding the other.

At some point, the voices stop, and another door is opened to a dimly lit room Shen Yuan doesn't immediately recognize. Looking up, it doesn't take long for him to realize why he doesn't recognize this room; Shen Yuan hasn't been here before, but the oddly spacious and well-furnished office gives him a clue this might be the head disciple's personal office.

The fog in Shen Yuan's mind hasn't cleared, but it has dissipated a bit. Looking up from the seat he does not remember sitting on, Shen Yuan sees Mu Qingfang's concerned expression and a bunch of System notifications. He can read those later.

"…Is shidi feeling a little better?" Mu Qingfang asks, standing in front of him with a careful posture, as if dealing with a cat that might run out at any moment.

Shen Yuan tries smiling, but his face refuses to do so. "Yes. I am not injured."

Silence permeates the room for a few seconds before Mu Qingfang quietly sighs. "It is only natural for Shen-shidi to be… shocked by such an event, especially if it is the first time. If shidi needs any help, this shixiong would be happy to be of assistance."

Ah, so that's what Mu Qingfang is trying to say. What is Shen Yuan even supposed to say? That he has experienced death and conveniently gone back in time just before it happened because this is a game?

None of this matters. It is a game, and it's not real. Shen Yuan's real body must be in a coma at the hospital right now. "This shidi thanks Mu-shixiong for the offer. It was only a scare."

"Only a scare…?" the Qian Cao Head Disciple mutters in disbelief, which Shen Yuan ignores, also ignoring the ringing bell in his head. Mu Qingfang sighs once again before looking at him. "If Shen-shidi says so. However, this shixiong must insist to at least take a look at the cut in your face; this is non-negotiable."

Shen Yuan frowns, feeling a sting on his left cheekbone as he does so. "What cut…?"

Touching the spot, Shen Yuan feels something wet, retracting his fingers to find a few drops of blood smeared on them. Compared to being stabbed in the stomach multiple times, this

feels like being poked on his cheek. Why is Mu Qingfang so inclined to treat such a small injury? Shen Yuan can just rub some disinfectant on it later.

Ah, Mu Qingfang is a love interest. Of course he will take care of even the most insignificant injuries.

“Don’t touch it,” Mu Qingfang scolds, grabbing a piece of cloth and dousing it with an unpleasant-smelling liquid. “It could leave a scar if not treated properly.”

It stings the moment it touches Shen Yuan’s cheekbones, but he says nothing. In his opinion, it would be better to have a tiny, insignificant scar on his face than to have an open stomach as he could have had if he didn’t dodge. Can’t Mu Qingfang just let him return to the dorms now that Shen Yuan is alright?

Looking down towards the floor throughout the whole procedure, Shen Yuan feels glad once the wound is covered by what he assumes is a Xianxia bandaid of sorts, since now he can finally go back to his room. It isn’t that Shen Yuan doesn’t like Mu Qingfang or anything, it’s just that… anyone’s presence feels overwhelming at the moment.

Mu Qingfang seems to have notice that, too. Stepping away from the other, the head disciple leaves some space between each other. “Shen-shidi may go back to the dormitories if he wishes so. If shidi does not feel well tomorrow, this shixiong can arrange to get a leave for…”

“It won’t be necessary,” Shen Yuan replies, getting up from the seat and bowing. He needs to get to the only place where he can be alone. “Thanking shixiong for the care.”

Without any more words, Shen Yuan walks out of the office in rushed steps, desperately wishing to go to his bed and forget everything that has happened once he wakes up.

Shen Yuan doesn’t forget everything, but he does feel slightly better.

At least as better as he possibly can, considering the circumstances. The sleepless night filled with nightmare and brief moments of sleep surely did not help — and the ever-present pain in between his ribs and abdomen also made it harder for him to rest. Telling himself that it is all in his head doesn’t make it go away; the pain stubbornly refuses to leave, like a mosquito you can never quite catch.

Shen Yuan remembers seeing such cases in TV shows and documentaries, and he remembers wondering how people managed to feel something that they *knew* wasn’t there. How can your brain convince itself of something you know isn’t true?

His mother had once told him trauma could do such things, as they watched an episode of a generic doctor show. Shen Yuan remembers nodding even though he did not actually understand, because it was simply an unspeakable concept in his mind. Shen Yuan himself had been in pain for a big portion of his life, yet he had never gotten such symptoms, only the real deal.

It can't be this, because for it to be a trauma, it has to happen. This isn't real life, and even within the game's current timeline, Shen Yuan never got stabbed by Ji Jue. Perhaps he had fallen just the wrong way and his muscles are punishing him for not leveling up his strength stat.

Shen Yuan decides to ignore the ache until it goes away. He doesn't need to think about it, he doesn't want to; if he does that, it'll go away eventually.

Putting on his plain robes, Shen Yuan tries to think of other things to distract himself. He has a morning shift at the healing pavilion, thankfully not at the emergency ward again, then a 'History of Cang Qiong Sect' class, and afterwards he has a cleaning shift. Enough to keep Shen Yuan distracted for the day, at least.

Tying his hair without much effort, Shen Yuan suddenly remembers he hasn't opened the System yet. Didn't it beep multiple times yesterday? He should really check if his progress with Mu Qingfang hasn't gone down after their last meeting…

Conjuring the insufferable System, Shen Yuan is immediately bombarded by a flood of notifications in front of him.

【 New achievement unlocked! — 'I'm not the one you're looking for!': be killed by Ji Jue during his qi deviation. Reward: +5% dodge success. 】

【 New mechanic 'Special Attributes' unlocked! Check the 'Special Attributes' tab for more information. 】

【 Mu Qingfang is concerned about User's injuries. Special Attribute 'Care' has increased to 1%. +5 affection points. 】

【Mu Qingfang is becoming increasingly worried about User's mental state. Special Attribute 'Care' increased to 4%. +20 affection points. 】

【 Mu Qingfang wonders if User has any physical injuries. Special Attribute 'Care' increased to 6%. +10 affection points. 】

【 Mu Qingfang is deeply concerned about User's mental health. Special Attribute 'Care' increased to 9%. +15 affection points. 】

Shen Yuan is utterly baffled by the System's notifications. What does it mean there's an achievement for doing something like dying?! Besides, it seems like Mu Qingfang wasn't offended or sad by Shen Yuan's… strange behavior, but rather touched by it?

While it is one of the strangest things Shen Yuan has seen inside this game so far, it somewhat makes sense — Mu Qingfang is a physician who likes to take care of people, so of course Shen Yuan can gather more points by being taken care of… Even if it sounds and makes him feel weird about it.

What matters now is that Mu Qingfang's affection points have surpassed Yue Qingyuan's far quicker than Shen Yuan could ever expect, which means that romancing the Qian Cao Head Disciple is a feasible option; Shen Yuan will surely be able to finish the game quickly if he keeps getting injuries as insignificant as a small cut.

Some of the head disciple's thoughts are more exaggerated than what truly happened, but maybe that's the effect of Shen Yuan being the protagonist. Why was Mu Qingfang that worried about his mental health, anyways? Of course Shen Yuan was a little startled by the whole Ji Jue situation, but he has gotten over it already. There's no need to worry about mental health when this isn't even real life!

Whatever, even if Mu Qingfang is a little dramatic, it will help Shen Yuan with his end goal. "System, open the 'Special Attributes' tab and explain what they're useful for."

【 'Special Attributes' are unique measures given to each romantic interest, ranging from 0 to 100%. 'Special Attributes' reflect each character's personality and can unlock exclusive interactions. A minimum of 50% for the chosen romantic interest is needed for User to reach Affection Level 'Kindred Souls'. 】

Another point system to keep track of, Shen Yuan sighs. "Can I lose any of these 'Special Attributes' points?"

【 User can lose 'Special Attributes' with hurtful interactions towards the romantic interest. Upon reaching 50%, User will only lose percentages above the 50% threshold. 】

So if Shen Yuan accidentally fucks up just after reaching 50%, he won't lose anything…? That sounds benevolent, considering it is the System's rules. Overall, Shen Yuan won't complain about a small treat for himself and the effort he has been putting.

"What are the unique attributes?" Shen Yuan asks, already remembering Mu Qingfang's is 'care'. If everything is simple like the Qian Cao Head Disciple's, then Shen Yuan won't have an issue even if he needs to romance another love interest.

【 Special Attributes:

Yue Qingyuan: Not discovered yet

Shen Qingqiu: Not discovered yet

Shang Qinghua: Not discovered yet

Liu Qingge: Not discovered yet

Mu Qingfang: Care — 9% 】

You've got to be joking me, Shen Yuan groans as he immediately commends the System to get out of his sight. Of course the System refuses to be useful, and of course Shen Yuan will

need to interact with each interest to unlock it — which Shen Yuan absolutely will not do if not necessary, much less for Shen Qingqiu or Shang Qinghua.

Just thinking about the Qing Jing Head Disciple is enough to make Shen Yuan's blood boil. The man wasn't content with just being an all-around asshole, now it has to affect Shen Yuan's safety as well! Would he need to constantly be on the lookout for new Ji Jue's who want to maim and kill Shen Qingqiu and somehow confuse the two of them?

Shaking his head, Shen Yuan tries not to think of the situation any longer. He needs to leave now if he does not want to arrive late and potentially get an earful from Han Lingyu — and hopefully not have to answer any questions regarding what happened yesterday, since gossip spreads like wildfire inside Qian Cao.

Shen Yuan steps out of his dormitory room and starts walking in a fast pace towards the healing pavilion.

The stares do not escape Shen Yuan's eyes, and neither does the pity coming from all of them. Shen Yuan has no clue what exactly has been spreading about what happened, but it seems like people did not have a negative view of his side of the story — maybe someone connected the dots, them being the fact Shen Yuan is new in the sect and that he hasn't gone to Bai Zhan Peak before.

People probably know it was an unfortunate misunderstanding that reeks of Shen Qingqiu, and Shen Yuan hopes they keep thinking about it quietly without bothering him.

As he climbs the stairs leading to the healing pavilion's main entrance, Shen Yuan hears someone calling out his name.

"Shen-shidi!" Wang Haoran exclaims, running up the stairs frantically until he is walking by Shen Yuan's side. "Are you well? Mu-dashixiong told me what happened…"

Giving the older disciple a strained smile, Shen Yuan replies. "This shidi is fine. Thanking Wang-shixiong for worrying."

Wang Haoran stares blankly for a few seconds before going back to his usual 'worried older brother' expression. "Still, it must not have been easy for shidi to experience such an outburst for the first time. Don't worry, it gets easier with time."

This time, Shen Yuan's smile is a little more sincere. Wang Haoran is just trying to be a nice shixiong, and Shen Yuan appreciates that. "Wang-shixiong must have seen quite a few qi deviations since entering the sect, this one assumes."

"It comes with the job," the older disciple replies, opening the door of the main pavilion for Shen Yuan. "Where is shidi stationed today?"

"At the southern pavilion," Shen Yuan replies, glad that today's shift will be easier. "This shidi will only deal with non-urgent cases and help with other duties."

The southern pavilion shouldn't have many cases, since it only deals with Cang Qiong Sect staff and important figures, most of who rarely need to step foot on Qian Cao if not for an emergency. Overall, Shen Yuan will be making low-grade medicine and cleaning the shelves for the rest of the morning.

"Lucky," Wang Haoran replies with a sigh. "I'm assigned to help Shizun with some research, so I'll be fetching things for the whole day. Anyways, this shixiong needs to go before Shizun makes me brew a hundred potions for being late again, so until later!"

Shen Yuan nods, saying his goodbyes to the older disciple who goes away just as fast as he arrived. Wang Haoran is a nice person, and if it were any other day, Shen Yuan would have wanted to talk more — but today, Shen Yuan would prefer keeping to himself and avoid as many conversations as he can.

So, instead of going to the break room as usual, Shen Yuan instead makes his way to the southern pavilion through the quiet hallways of Qian Cao's main building. The only thing waiting for him at the break room will be countless people asking Shen Yuan how he's feeling and asking for more details of what happened, so why bother going?

Thankfully, most of the path to the southern pavilion is empty, for the exception of the occasional sleep-deprived disciples who had the unfortunate overnight shift. Shen Yuan walks through the hallways absentmindedly, trying his best not to think deeply about anything — once he reaches the pavilion and starts his work, the tasks will be enough to keep his mind away from wandering to places he doesn't want it to.

In a stroke of luck, Shen Yuan doesn't meet Mu Qingfang at all — which, honestly, had been the main worry in his head. Shen Yuan knows it would be better if he simply ignored his mild discomfort and sought the head disciple to get more points, but Shen Yuan *really* needs to have this one day to himself before having to go back to normal.

Tomorrow Shen Yuan can pick up on his slack. Today, he just wishes to not have to think about it.

Shen Yuan enters the southern pavilion, taking a quick look around the room to remember each cabinet and shelf he can see. There's not many people here yet — only a few disciples Shen Yuan hasn't seen before, who are chatting leisurely while sitting down, and Han Lingyu.

Upon seeing Shen Yuan, Han Lingyu immediately walks towards his direction. Shen Yuan gulps, wondering what his shijie will say or do — with the way the gossip has spread, Han Lingyu surely knows what happened yesterday.

"Shen-shidi," Han Lingyu greets him, to which Shen Yuan awkwardly nods his head. She stares quietly at him for a few seconds before continuing. "Glad to see shidi is well. Here is your task list."

Handing over a piece of paper with her hands, Han Lingyu watches Shen Yuan take the document and says nothing — no uncomfortable questions, no pity stares, nothing. Maybe this is why Han Lingyu is his favorite martial sibling; she may be quiet, but she's also

incredibly attuned to what others are feeling, and always knows when to say or not say something.

If only Shen Yuan had met someone like Han Lingyu back in his world, would he not have been so lonely?

“Thank you,” Shen Yuan replies, giving his shijie a small smile. Han Lingyu smiles back before turning her back and leaving to talk to the other disciples.

【 NPC ‘Han Lingyu’ is relieved to see User is not injured. +20 reputation points. Current points: 168. 】

Ignoring the System’s pop up, Shen Yuan looks down to read the task list given to him. As expected, Shen Yuan has to deal with mostly small tasks, including mixing and crafting some low-grade medicine, organizing last night’s records, making sure there’s enough water in the bowels and insuring the old towels are sent for washing.

Half of the morning goes by without anything of note; Shen Yuan changes the bedsheets, mixes a few vitality brews for the older Cang Qiong staff members that come by, organizes a few misaligned decorations on the entrance desk; following the tasks helps him maintain some of his sanity, at least for long enough until something big enough happens to distract Shen Yuan and sweep yesterday’s events under the rug.

The southern pavilion is weirdly understaffed for Qian Cao standards, and when asking Han Lingyu, she said it was because the emergency ward was full of Wan Jian disciples after a furnace exploded — both Shen Yuan and Han Lingyu were confused about how such a thing could even happen, and none of the disciples present in the southern pavilion had a clue about it either.

At some point, Han Lingyu is asked to help with the furnace crisis going on at the emergency ward, and Shen Yuan is left with only two other disciples — both less experienced than him, somehow.

A sigh comes out of Shen Yuan’s mouth. It shouldn’t matter, since the southern pavilion is not commonly overwhelmed, and most of their daily duties can be simplified to two categories: making potions for older people and refilling patient’s prescriptions. Nothing should happen while Shen Yuan is in charge, so there’s no reason to be nervous.

Shen Yuan should have expected things wouldn’t go his way.

It’s half past eleven, and Shen Yuan’s stomach is starting to growl; he hadn’t eaten breakfast since that would require going to the dining hall filled with people, and he wasn’t even feeling that hungry to begin with. Now, however, Shen Yuan won’t be able to skip lunch just because he doesn’t want to deal with others — he either goes and has lunch with everyone or finds a way to get food fulfilling enough somewhere else.

As Shen Yuan starts wondering if he should excuse himself and leave early to snatch some pre-midday freshly cooked food, someone walks into the southern pavilion’s main hall.

【 New Quest! Heal Liu Qingge's injuries. Reward: 100 R-Points. Does User wish to accept the quest? 】

Liu Qingge…? Shen Yuan reads with nothing short of absolute shock, going pale as he watches the tall figure walk into the pavilion in quick steps. If not for the System, Shen Yuan would not have noticed it so quickly — it still baffles him that Liu Qingge is that pretty and so unlike what Shen Yuan had expected of someone called the 'War God'.

Both of Shen Yuan's martial siblings, who had been lazing around, also pale as they watch the Bai Zhan Head Disciple walk into the pavilion for treatment — for his arm, Shen Yuan assumes, as it clearly has been scratched by some beast, the blood already drying on top of his skin.

Shen Yuan, knowing he will have to deal with this one way or another, accepts the task.

【 Quest Accepted! Wishing User good luck! 】

Putting on his best polite smile, Shen Yuan walks towards the Bai Zhan Head Disciple while trying not to tremble out of nervousness. He really, *really* wasn't prepared for this.

"What may Qian Cao assist Head Disciple Liu with today?" Shen Yuan asks, not looking Liu Qingge in the eyes.

What if his semblance to Shen Qingqiu makes Liu Qingge automatically hate him? By this point, Shen Qingqiu must have already tried to kill the Bai Zhan Head Disciple. What if Liu Qingge thinks they are cousins or something like that…?

"I need to heal my arm," Liu Qingge replies with a sigh, seemingly annoyed about something.

It only makes Shen Yuan more nervous. None of his inexperienced shixiongs bother to do anything besides looking like deers caught in headlights, so Shen Yuan must deal with this crisis by himself. "This one understands. Please sit so this one may examine Head Disciple Liu…"

Liu Qingge nods without saying anything, sitting on the nearest chair available and staining everything around him with nasty monster blood that Shen Yuan will have to spend at least thirty minutes trying to clean. For someone covered in blood, Liu Qingge looks surprisingly healthy — and good looking, somehow.

Looking at the medium-sized scratch on the head disciple's arm, Shen Yuan starts to wonder what beast could have done it. 1cm width at its widest, at least 6cm long, four parallel scratches, damage mostly to the skin and minimal to the muscle…

"It was a Northern Red-clawed Wolf," Liu Qingge replies, making Shen Yuan stop for a second as he feels his face getting warmer. He didn't notice he was talking out loud…

Well, at least Shen Yuan knows Northern Red-clawed Wolves aren't poisonous, although they can deal quite an amount of damage to unprepared fighters, which doesn't seem to be Liu

Qingge's case. Shen Yuan will need to do a screening anyways, but from what he can see, healing Liu Qingge's arm shouldn't be impossible. Shaking his head lightly, Shen Yuan tries to focus on the injury so he can forget the embarrassment of being awkward.

"Please give me your wrist," Shen Yuan says, breathing in and out mentally as he prepares for his first serious qi screening. He had trained many times, of course, but to have Liu Qingge as his first patient is not something Shen Yuan expected.

The Bai Zhan Head Disciple does as told, reaching out his right wrist. Shen Yuan really tries not to freak out, at least visually; touching the mildly cold skin with two fingers, Shen Yuan follows what he has been trained to do and starts to probe into Liu Qingge's spiritual veins.

As Shen Yuan looks for any signs of internal injury or poison, he is glad to find that there's nothing wrong with Liu Qingge outside of his arm scratch. At least it won't be difficult to cure, and after mending what he can with his own qi, Shen Yuan only needs to prescribe some topical medication for the Bai Zhan Head Disciple.

"Thankfully, there are no internal injuries or any venom in Liu-shixiong's body," Shen Yuan says with relief, to which the Bai Zhan Head Disciple nods without much interest. "This one will be mending some ruptured tissues and blood vessels right now."

Liu Qingge nods, and Shen Yuan goes right back to work. It still feels weird to be able to fix someone's internal injuries this way, but it feels weirdly natural for Shen Yuan — maybe because it is natural in this world. It is like molding clay, in a way; or like what water bending probably feels like.

It only takes a few minutes for Shen Yuan to finish. Opening his eyes proudly, Shen Yuan is a little startled to find the Bai Zhan Head Disciple staring back.

【 Quest 'Heal Liu Qingge's injuries' successfully completed! +100 R-Points, +10 Affection Points added to character 'Bai Zhan's Head Disciple, Liu Qingge'! 】

"T-this one has finished," Shen Yuan stutters, looking away towards the now mostly healed arm wound. "This one will be prescribing some topical medication so there will be no scar-"

"Are you related to Shen Qingqiu?" Liu Qingge asks, making Shen Yuan go silent as he stares blankly towards the Bai Zhan Head Disciple. The two disciples watching everything from the back let out a gasp.

Shen Yuan can't control the way his voice comes out sounding a tad irritated. "This one is *completely* sure he is not related to Head Disciple Shen in any way or matter. Now, if Head Disciple Liu does not mind, this one will fetch the medicine."

Without receiving an answer, Shen Yuan storms his way to the storage room, grabbing the damned topical medicines as slowly as he possibly can. Shen Yuan knows he shouldn't do anything to annoy Liu Qingge, but he can't go back to the Bai Zhan Head Disciple right now — Shen Yuan is both pissed off and extremely tired just by hearing the question he hates so badly.

Of all days, Liu Qingge had to choose this one to ask this question? Does he not know what his own shidi did the night before?

Two or so minutes pass as Shen Yuan tries to calm down inside the cramped storage room. Knowing he cannot stall his return any longer, he sighs and grabs all the items needed, organizing them neatly so Liu Qingge can receive them and just go away — and Shen Yuan can leave the other two disciples to deal with the mess left by the Bai Zhan Head Disciple.

Once Shen Yuan walks back, he's surprised to find that Liu Qingge is already standing, seemingly waiting for the medication as he looks towards the ground. Shen Yuan makes his way to the head disciple as quickly as he can, wishing to get this done with already so they can both go their own ways — Shen Yuan can think about Liu Qingge's route later.

As Shen Yuan is about to hand the bottles of healing cream, he's instead met with an apologetic-looking Liu Qingge.

"Apologies, it was rude of me to ask such questions," Liu Qingge says, surprising Shen Yuan once again. He hadn't really expected to receive an apology, honestly.

Is this the privilege of being a protagonist…? In any case, Shen Yuan can't do much but sigh and accept it. "It is fine. Liu-shixiong is not the first to ask such questions."

Liu Qingge nods, taking the medicine and prescriptions handed by Shen Yuan. At least he noticed the question made Shen Yuan uncomfortable, which is much more than other people have done. The Bai Zhan Head Disciple's eyes flutter between the medicine and Shen Yuan's face, his mouth opening to say something but giving up at the last moment.

The head disciple sighs and bows his head once again. "Thank you for the care. May I ask for your name?"

"Shen Yuan," he replies, mildly regretting using his real name while picking one. "Once again, not related to Shen Qingqiu."

Perhaps it was the annoyance dripping from his voice as he utters the Qing Jing Head Disciple's name, or perhaps Liu Qingge likes meeting people who don't like Shen Qingqiu. A tiny, unnoticeable smile forms on the head disciple's face, which makes Shen Yuan widen his eyes at the sight.

【 Liu Qingge thinks User is funny. +5 Affection Points added to 'Bai Zhan's Head Disciple, Liu Qingge'. +15 reputation points. Current points: 183. 】

Shen Yuan doesn't question Liu Qingge's weird sense of humor, as it does benefit him in the end — and even gave him reputation points, enough to get him even closer to leveling up.

"Understood," Liu Qingge replies, the tiny smile still on his face. "Until we meet again, Shen-shidi."

With that, Liu Qingge turns and walks away, leaving the southern pavilion and causing Shen Yuan to look for the nearest seat to fall back on. Both his useless shixiongs hurry away from

their spots to talk about the situation, which Shen Yuan simply nods without listening much. While it was stressful, Liu Qingge is… nicer than he looks, weirdly enough.

A little air headed when it comes to asking questions, maybe, but Shen Yuan also has his own faults in that regard. This meeting has ended up being better than Shen Yuan could have expected, and also proved that his grind to level up his skills wasn't for nothing — all he had been putting effort into will help him beat this game, even if it takes longer than he first expected.

Shen Yuan feels just a little bit less down as he looks towards the pavilion's exit.

Chapter 6: don't expect the male leads to have common sense

Chapter Notes

> hey everyone, apologies for the long wait and the unanswered comments. unfortunately, my dog has died unexpectedly last month and it hit me really hard; im still processing it, honestly, but i've managed to write this with a bit of effort and attempts to go back to normal life :) so, im dedicating this chapter to nina, my baby, who i hope is playing with many dogs and eating good food at dog heaven 💕
> i hope you guys enjoy the chapter :)

Shen Yuan's tardy lunch is less tumultuous than he expected.

Upon her return to the southern pavilion, Han Lingyu doesn't believe Shen Yuan's claim that while she was away, Liu Qingge of all people came over to get treatment. His shijie shakes her head, saying that the Bai Zhan Head Disciple is too much of a meathead to bother with medical treatments in the first place — much less with something as minor as a scratch.

It is only after Shen Yuan's useless shixiong intervenes and confirms his story that Han Lingyu eventually comes to accept what happened. It doesn't leave her any less baffled, of course; Shen Yuan himself was caught off guard, especially when he hears Han Lingyu's exclamation that she can count on her fingers the number of times Liu Qingge has been to Qian Cao before.

Perhaps out of pity, Han Lingyu offers to grab some lunch with Shen Yuan, which he accepts. While Shen Yuan wished to hide himself as much as possible, it would be bearable to sit with his shijie at the dining hall — she's cool enough to not let anyone mess with Shen Yuan while she's there, much less bother him with questions.

It is a quiet lunch, but it is a comfortable one.

Putting away the dirty bowl in his hands, Shen Yuan bows his head towards the kitchen staff taking his dishes and waits until Han Lingyu has finished doing the same.

"Does shidi have class now?" Han Lingyu asks, walking beside him as they both leave the dining hall filled with disciples talking and gossiping.

"History of Cang Qiong Sect," Shen Yuan replies, feeling rather relieved he won't have to deal with anyone for the next few hours. "Does shijie also have class or did you get a break?"

"Even worse, I'm supposed to inspect the greenhouse today," Han Lingyu replies with a sigh as they walk through the path leading to the classrooms. "Some idiot tripped on a Passion

Star Orchid specimen and got pollen all over the place. I have to make sure all the pollen has been properly cleaned."

Shen Yuan is pretty sure that's one of PIDW's infamous papapapa flowers, which is enough to make him sympathetic to Han Lingyu's suffering. "Shijie should at least get a day off after dealing with that… Can't you ask Mu-shixiong for one?"

"This shijie has secured a full leave for the Spring Festival, so it is best not to ask for one…" Han Lingyu sighs. Shen Yuan has heard from other disciples that getting a full leave for big festivals such as this one is extremely difficult, so it makes sense that his shijie doesn't want to try her luck again.

A familiar voice speaks from behind both disciples. "Han-shimei may get a one-day long leave after finishing the task," Mu Qingfang casually says, smiling as usual as both Han Lingyu and Shen Yuan quickly turn around in startlement. "Consider it payment for dealing with Wei-shixiong's ramblings."

Han Lingyu makes a sour expression at the mention of this Wei-shixiong — whom Shen Yuan assumes must be Wei Qingwei, since his shijie had dealt with the Wan Jian disciples at the emergency ward —, but quickly nods in gratitude towards Mu Qingfang.

"Thanking Mu-shixiong for the break. The greenhouse report shall be on dashixiong's desk before dusk," Han Lingyu cheerfully says — at least for her standards, which include a very faint smile and slight pitch raise. Looking between the head disciple and Shen Yuan for a few seconds, Han Lingyu gives Shen Yuan a strange look, winking so quickly he barely catches it before she speaks up again. "I'll be on my way now. Wishing Shen-shidi good luck with his history class!"

Just like that, Han Lingyu quickly disappears amongst the other disciples, leaving Shen Yuan with the person he was trying the hardest to avoid today.

"Is shidi going to the eastern lecture pavilion?" Mu Qingfang asks, probably already knowing that's exactly where Shen Yuan's newbie class is at; Shen Yuan simply nods and hopes the head disciple won't do the obvious thing he's about to do. "May this shixiong accompany Shen-shidi? It so happens this one must meet with Senior Wen to discuss some matters."

Of course Mu Qingfang has to meet with a senior that conveniently teaches most classes exactly at the pavilion Shen Yuan is going; his luck going off the charts, as usual. As much as Shen Yuan wants to tell the Qian Cao Head Disciple that no, he doesn't really feel like walking together with him, Shen Yuan knows it would be not only rude but might actually hurt his relationship with Mu Qingfang.

So Shen Yuan smiles lightly and nods, hoping his expression doesn't look too forced.

With that, both disciples start walking, and Shen Yuan is very much aware of the stares and whispers coming from every other disciple they encounter on the way — and he can't even blame them, because of course all Qian Cao gossipers must be jumping in glee seeing their polite but detached head disciple walking a newbie to class. A newbie who almost got gutted

open *(and did, in fact, get gutted open,* Shen Yuan grimly reminds himself) just yesterday; the Cang Qiong gossipers association must be having the best day of their lives.

Qian Cao's breathtaking scenery isn't enough to take away the discomfort and awkwardness Shen Yuan feels during their walk towards the pavilion, as he waits for the unspoken question to seep out of Mu Qingfang's mouth at any moment. As the grassy hills turn into bamboo groves, Shen Yuan feels his breath shorten as the area becomes devoid of whispering disciples.

The first question that comes out of the Qian Cao Head Disciple's mouth isn't exactly what Shen Yuan expected.

"This shixiong has heard that Shen-shidi had to treat Bai Zhan's head disciple," Mu Qingfang says, turning his head to look at Shen Yuan. "Has Liu-shixiong given shidi a hard time?"

Shaking off the initial surprise from hearing the question, Shen Yuan shakes his head. "Not really. Head Disciple Liu was polite and… nicer than this one expected."

Mu Qingfang's usual calm expression turned to shock for a brief moment, as if not believing what Shen Yuan had to say about Liu Qingge. Is the Bai Zhan Head Disciple known to be rude or did Mu Qingfang expect something because of Shen Yuan's semblance to Shen Qingqiu? "How so?"

Preferring not to share about the slight annoyance caused by Liu Qingge, Shen Yuan looks away from the head disciple and looks towards the bamboo stalks. "Liu-shixiong thanked this one for the care and smiled a little, so I would rank him above most patients in terms of niceness."

It takes a little longer than expected for Mu Qingfang to laugh at the remark, but quick enough that Shen Yuan doesn't get nervous about accidentally offending the head disciple or breaking a Qian Cao rule regarding jokes about patients or something.

"This shixiong is glad to hear that. Still, it must have been a stressful situation since Liu-shixiong ended up being shidi's first patient," the Qian Cao Head Disciple remarks, and Shen Yuan cannot deny; it was nerve-wracking, to say the least. Turning his head towards Mu Qingfang, Shen Yuan doesn't get a chance to answer before the head disciple continues speaking. "If there is anything burdening Shen-shidi, this shixiong is always happy to listen."

【 New permanent quest added! Talk to Mu Qingfang about your emotions and problems. Reward per completion: 70 R-Points. 】

It takes a few seconds for Shen Yuan to really grasp what the floating tab in front of him means — did the System just give him a task to *go to therapy with Mu Qingfang????*

Looking at the head disciple's eyes, Shen Yuan is even more surprised to find that Mu Qingfang looks completely earnest in his offer, perhaps looking a little too much like Shen Yuan's close family and friends looked whenever they were worried about him. Perhaps it is because of the semblance that a smidge of warmth finds its way to his heart and to the small smile forming in Shen Yuan's face.

“Thank you,” Shen Yuan replies, perhaps a little swayed by the ache in his heart whenever he thinks of his family, but not swayed enough to immediately start therapy sessions with the future Qian Cao Peak Lord. “This shidi shall remember it.”

The R-Points surely are tempting, but Shen Yuan knows how his mind and heart works too well — if he starts delving into all the things he doesn’t want to think about, then how will he find the strength to keep going? It isn’t like he can tell Mu Qingfang about his true identity, about how this world is actually a dating sim based on an 18+ novel; if he cannot share the entirety of his story, then why open up at all?

【Mu Qingfang is relieved User seems to be considering his proposal. +5 Affection Points added to ‘Qian Cao’s Head Disciple, Mu Qingfang’.】

The Qian Cao Head Disciple smiles warmly, continuing his leisurely pace towards the pavilion that becomes visible after the vast bamboo groves shift into hills of low shrubs and tall grass, disciples scattered throughout the area in small groups as they prepare for class. “It seems we have reached our destination. Does Shen-shidi know the directions to his class?”

Already sensing what the head disciple might want to do, Shen Yuan quickly nods. “Yes, I am well acquainted with the path…”

Mu Qingfang hums in response, not showing any visible disappointment at the answer. “Then, this shixiong will be going now. Until later, Shen-shidi.”

Smiling politely as the head disciple turns away, Shen Yuan mentally lets out a sigh of relief — Mu Qingfang is nice and all, but the issue with hanging out with your peak’s head disciple all the time is that people will be talking about it, and they won’t be subtle about it. It takes a while for a previous NEET to get used to it, and Shen Yuan will be taking his sweet time until figuring out how to ignore the obvious staring.

Shen Yuan sighs once again as he enters the classroom, unable to completely focus.

A week passes by, and Shen Yuan wishes he could say it passed by in a blink.

In truth, all his days were filled with the same routine he had fallen accustomed to; wake up, go to class, study, take a shift at the healing pavilion if he’s scheduled. Mu Qingfang once again disappears to whoever knows where, probably on some classified mission on the other side of the realm. Is this the game’s way of giving Shen Yuan a break from strategizing the most efficient ways to romance a character, or is it an attempt to balance the fact Shen Yuan is a Qian Cao disciple, therefore more prone to meeting the Qian Cao Head Disciple?

Whatever it is, Shen Yuan is grateful for the break. It gave him enough time to put his mind back on track, and it gave him an opportunity to grind his skills in a way that would make cram schools in his city pale.

Since he only had 150 R-Points to spare, Shen Yuan knew he had to choose carefully when to use the 2x skill gain bonus sold in the points store — so he chose to spend those three

precious hours on his single free afternoon, which ended up with Shen Yuan grinding the intelligence skill at a secluded corner of the Qian Cao library.

And it paid off! Shen Yuan managed to bring his intelligence skill up a point, from a measly 2 to… a less measly 3. He focused the rest of his week bringing his dexterity up to 3, which then leaves only one skill point of each needed for his Inner Disciple promotion, plus the awareness level that Shen Yuan can get by meditating a lot. When he finishes dealing with the skill levels, Shen Yuan will turn his focus to mastering his 'Demonic Zoology', which will require visiting Qing Jing's vast library — and that's why it is left for last.

Shen Yuan still has more than a month left before the 'Inner Disciple' task expires, 46 days to be exact — that is plenty of time to level up three skill points in total, especially if Shen Yuan manages to get a hold of another 150 R-Points. According to his calculations, he might have three weeks or so to work solely on mastering the special skill, which should be enough as well.

Sighing as he puts away the book in his hands back into the shelf, Shen Yuan looks at the water clock inside the library. The dining hall should have opened just now, which means Shen Yuan can grab some lunch while it's still warm and delicious; for Qian Cao standards, that is.

Unfortunately, the world (or the System) doesn't think Shen Yuan should get a break.

As he walks out of the library building, Shen Yuan runs into a frantic-looking shijie of his, whose eyes seem to sparkle as she finds Shen Yuan. "Shen-shidi! Is shidi free at the moment?"

Shen Yuan considers lying, but Chen Xi's desperate look is enough to make him meekly nod as he prays whatever she asks him to do won't involve doing strenuous work or leaving the peak. Maybe he can get some reputation points or coins out of this?

"Thank Heaven…" Chen Xi quietly mutters, looking at Shen Yuan as if he was her savior. A bead of sweat forms in his forehead. "Zhang Hui was supposed to take this batch of medicine to Qiong Ding, but he touched a Star-shaped violet vine and now he's throwing up non stop at the emergency hall…"

Looking down, Shen Yuan finds the crate of medicine in Chen Xi's arms, which looks awfully heavy for its size. However, before Shen Yuan can refuse the request, a white box of text pops up on top of Chen Xi's head.

【New quest! Deliver the supplies to Qiong Ding. Reward: 100 R-Points. Does User wish to accept the quest?】

100 R-Points for one delivery is very good, even if it means meeting with Yue Qingyuan… Which Shen Yuan will have to meet anyway since he accepted a quest about the future sect leader. Going to Qiong Ding will be a good start to start his investigation of whatever the task wants him to find out, and getting some extra affection and reputation points from Yue Qingyuan shouldn't be bad either.

“I can take those to Qiong Ding,” Shen Yuan replies before Chen Xi has the chance to continue, making his shijie let out the biggest sigh of relief and smile brightly towards him.

“Thanks, shidi has just saved my schedule,” Chen Xi says as she hands over the crate to Shen Yuan. “I’ll make sure to put in a good word for Shen-sidi to the Seniors. Ah, also, shidi should give the supplies to the disciple in charge of Qiong Ding’s storage facility, which is right beside their dining hall, near the path to the Lingxi caves. Wishing good luck to shidi!”

With that, Chen Xi leaves the heavy crate on Shen Yuan’s arms and sprints back to the healing pavilion, most likely already late for her midday shift. *At least she was nice enough to leave instructions,* Shen Yuan thinks as he tries to adjust the weight so his back doesn’t hurt, which doesn’t really work. Sighing, Shen Yuan simply focuses on the 100 R-Point reward and walks towards Qian Cao’s entrance.

Shen Yuan misses having a phone and earbuds, honestly. Even an MP3 would be better than nothing at this point — walking through the oddly lengthy rainbow bridge is an experience that is only interesting for about three minutes until you get tired of looking at the clouds and terrain under.

Some disciples from other peaks throw him weird looks, probably because of his semblance to Shen Qingqiu. Shen Yuan has been feeling less irritated about it, as he eventually has to get used to it, but it is nonetheless annoying to have his image somewhat tied to the scum villain outside of Qian Cao.

It will take a lot of willpower for Shen Yuan not to ask Shen Qingqiu if he can be a little less of an asshole when they eventually meet. Shen Qingqiu’s shit personality literally cost Shen Yuan his life!

As Shen Yuan reaches the intersection uniting the peaks’ bridges, he lets out a huff as he tries to adjust the weight of the wooden crate he’s carrying once more. How can a single box of medicine, full of a bunch of grinded herbs on small containers, be this heavy? Shen Yuan’s poor arms are screaming for relief, and he’s only halfway on the path to Qiong Ding Peak!

Ironically enough, focusing too much on the weight on his arms causes Shen Yuan to lose his footing instead, the added load on his arms tipping his body to the front and towards the edge of the bridge. Letting out a startled gasp and closing his eyes, Shen Yuan briefly wonders if he will have to die a stupid death like falling because he has zero balance, until his thoughts are interrupted by a hand holding his waist and pulling Shen Yuan back to safety.

Ah, this must be when Yue Qingyuan shows up, Shen Yuan thinks as he lets out a sigh of relief and slowly opens his eyes. Instead, he is met with a person wearing light yellow robes instead of the black and gray ones of Qiong Ding, and a face Shen Yuan has seen before on the promotional arts of the game and novel.

He was saved by Shang Qinghua of all people.

“Take it easy,” the An Ding Head Disciple says, grabbing the wooden crate with one hand as the other still lingers near Shen Yuan’s waist for a brief second before it retracts. “This one would rather not have to deal with funerary arrangements today.”

If not for the absurdity of the situation and the fact this is Shang Qinghua, Shen Yuan might have laughed. Taking a moment to collect himself, Shen Yuan bows towards the head disciple. Since Shang Qinghua is a proud and arrogant man, acting meek and apologetic might make the An Ding Head Disciple less likely to conspire against Shen Yuan. “Thanking Shang-shixiong for the help, and apologies for interrupting shixiong’s path.”

【 Shang Qinghua is pleased with User’s apology. +5 Affection Points added to ‘An Ding’s Head Disciple, Shang Qinghua’. 】

Oh my God, this man is a weirdo, Shen Yuan cries in his head as he reads the System’s notification. At least Yue Qingyuan’s weirdness regarding Shen Qingqiu can provide Shen Yuan with some never-seen lore that answers probably half — if not all — of Shen Qingqiu’s and Yue Qingyuan’s stupid decision in the original work; this, however, establishes Shang Qinghua’s strange need for power and respect in a manner that makes Shen Yuan feel awfully uncomfortable.

“This one has not seen you before,” Shang Qinghua comments, observing Shen Yuan’s face with furrowed brows and an attempt at a polite smile. His eyes briefly linger on Shen Yuan’s disciple robes and the paper glued to the top of the crate, indicating it is to be sent to Qiong Ding. “What is your name?”

Shen Yuan can tell what this sect traitor is thinking from a mile away — he’s thinking Shen Yuan is some distant relative of Shen Qingqiu who got into the sect with his connections. Probably throwing insults at him mentally too, knowing Shang Qinghua’s character.

“This one’s name is Shen Yuan,” he replies, lowering his head and eyes slightly in an attempt to not annoy the An Ding Head Disciple and make him uninterested enough to leave Shen Yuan alone. “Not related to Head Disciple Shen.”

Silence follows for a second before a small laugh echoes through the bridge. Shen Yuan raises his head to find Shang Qinghua looking amused by the clarification provided.

“Shen-shidi must have guessed what was in this one’s mind, then,” Shang Qinghua says, observing Shen Yuan’s expressions keenly as if trying to pry open a box to take a look inside. It makes Shen Yuan insanely uncomfortable, to say the least. “It must be a frequent question, surely.”

“Indeed,” Shen Yuan replies while holding back an annoyed sigh, hoping the An Ding Peak Lord could simply leave him alone and go on his merry delivery path. “Apologies, but this one must go deliver this batch. Thanking Shang-shixiong for his assistance once again.”

Bending down to grab the heavy box, Shen Yuan invokes all the inner strength and perseverance he has in this small, stupid body and raises the wooden crate to his knee level. Letting out a stifled gasp at the weight, Shen Yuan wonders what the hell is inside this seemingly simple batch of medicine — or is the strength skill that important for tasks like this?

As Shen Yuan struggles to raise the box to his waist level, a hand suddenly supports the crate from underneath.

“It seems like Shen-shidi is not used to handling tasks like this,” the An Ding Head Disciple hums, a disturbingly still smile on his face as he observes the other’s reaction. “Lucky for shidi, this shixiong is on the way to Qiong Ding at the moment. Does shidi want a helping hand?”

【 New quest! Accept Shang Qinghua’s help and accompany him to Qiong Ding. Reward: 50 R-Points. Does User wish to accept the quest? 】

Shen Yuan *wants* to say no — but how can he do so when accepting the quest can give him enough R-Points to buy another skill learning boost? The System must be laughing at Shen Yuan’s misery; to make it exactly 150 R-Points in total is simply absurd.

Still, knowing Shang Qinghua’s personality, Shen Yuan can’t help but ask. “What does shixiong want in return?”

【 Shang Qinghua thinks User is interesting. +10 Affection Points added to ‘An Ding’s Head Disicple, Shang Qinghua’. 】

A bemused gaze falls upon Shang Qinghua’s eyes. “Isn’t a walk with Qian Cao’s most notorious addition enough?”

It doesn’t take a genius to understand what the An Ding Head Disciple is talking about. Shen Yuan knew the situation with Ji Jue would inevitably spread to other peaks, as all Cang Qiong disciples seem to have gossiping as their primary hobby, but to know he is indeed talked about enough for Shang Qinghua to call him ‘notorious’ leaves Shen Yuan’s stomach upside down with anxiety.

“...If Shang-shixiong says so,” Shen Yuan relents, letting the head disciple take the box from his hands with little to no effort. Perhaps Shen Yuan should focus more on his strength…

Another awkward walk with a head disciple starts, although Shen Yuan would much rather have to deal with Mu Qingfang and his harmless worrying rather than the viper next to him, waiting to strike whenever he finds a weak spot. Passerby disciples seem shocked by the unlikely duo, with Xian Shu fairies whispering between each other like Shen Yuan isn’t glaring at them and hoping they can be less obvious about it.

Surprisingly enough, Shang Qinghua doesn’t really ask anything during the awfully long walk to Qiong Ding’s entrance, and neither does Shen Yuan try to start any conversation. It seems the An Ding Head Disciple is pleased enough with dissecting Shen Yuan’s expression as much as humanly possible, which only makes the walk more awkward and embarrassing for Shen Yuan.

At least the view is nice enough for Shen Yuan to pretend like he’s intently watching it.

Eventually, Shen Yuan sees the silhouette of what must be Qiong Ding’s entrance gate. Muttering a prayer to every deity he can think of, Shen Yuan feels his body filling with vitality as he sees the peak’s buildings taking clearer shapes as they approach. Shang Qinghua doesn’t say anything about it, if he noticed.

Shen Yuan greets the entrance guards with a smile, which they reciprocate as they allow Shang Qinghua and Shen Yuan in without question. Shen Yuan looks around the peak with awe; Qian Cao is beautiful, without a doubt, but Qiong Ding has an air of sophistication and natural beauty that he hasn't seen in the most expensive restaurants and hotels his parents took him to.

It isn't ostentatious, neither is it obnoxious; it is subtle enough to be pleasant to the untrained eye, and incredibly luxurious for those who know where to look. Shen Yuan is sure the vast gardens and statues alone must be worth more than an apartment on the outskirts of Shanghai, which is to say, *a lot.*

"It seems like we will have to part ways, shidi," Shang Qinghua says as they stop in front of the central courtyard, interrupting Shen Yuan's moment of observation of the future spot where Sha Hualing will invade Cang Qiong. "This shixiong's meeting is about to start, unfortunately."

Shen Yuan turns towards the An Ding Head Disciple and bows, deciding to play it safe until the end. "Thanking Shang-shixiong for his assistance. Wishing shixiong a good meeting."

Shang Qinghua says nothing, handing the box over as he nods. For once, the An Ding Head Disciple seems to be deep in thought, his gaze lingering on Shen Yuan's form for a moment before he turns around.

What scares Shen Yuan the most is that he cannot tell a single thing those eyes hold.

【 Quest 'Accept Shang Qinghua's help' successfully completed! +50 R-Points, +10 Affection Points added to 'An Ding's Head Disciple, Shang Qinghua'. +20 reputation points. User's reputation level is now 'Rising Star'. More tasks and special events have been unlocked. 】

Looking at the text box in front of him, Shen Yuan is surprised by the amount of affection points gained. Counting in his head, Shen Yuan is sure he must have gathered 25 so far with Shang Qinghua in one go; it is ten more than what he currently has with Liu Qingge, which is *unacceptable!* Should he drop by Bai Zhan when he's done or should Shen Yuan wait until Liu Qingge decides to visit Qian Cao again?

Adjusting the wooden crate is his arms — that feels lighter than before, probably courtesy of the System not having any other male lead around to carry it —, Shen Yuan suppresses a sigh and looks around the grand courtyard, eventually locating the sign pointing towards the Lingxi caves. Ignoring the disciples throwing strange stares at him, Shen Yuan starts walking towards the sign.

It doesn't take long for Shen Yuan to spot Qiong Ding's dining hall, a huge nameplate hung above the entrance in the same style as the others — and yes, Shen Yuan had already looked at the Qiong Ding nameplate that Sha Hualing wants to steal during her invasion, but unfortunately, Shen Yuan couldn't admire it for long due to Shang Qinghua's presence before.

Just thinking that, in a few decades (or centuries, since that hack author hadn't bothered indicating how old the Peak Lords were when Luo Binghe was a disciple), this whole place would be burned to the ground… It makes Shen Yuan strangely uneasy thinking about it.

Shaking his head, Shen Yuan looks around the dining hall until he finds the storage facility. His arms feel a tad sore due to the weight he's carrying, so when Shen Yuan finds that the door is already opened, he breathes out a sigh of relief and enters the facility. *At least something went right today…*

Shen Yuan quickly spots the information counter, with a bored Qiong Ding disciple reading some books so intently that he doesn't even notice Shen Yuan is approaching.

"Hello," Shen Yuan politely greets, watching as the disciple jumps, startled at the sudden sound. "This one is here to deliver a batch from Qian Cao."

"Ah, yes," the disciple mutters, scrambling to get a ledger from under the pile of books — with suspiciously yellow covers, mind you. He looks at the wooden crate, writes something down and looks up. "Shidi may leave it on the empty shelf in room four."

Shen Yuan gives the Qiong Ding disciple a strained smile. *Do I really need to take it there myself? Isn't that your job?* "I see, thanking shixiong for the information."

The Qiong Ding disciple mumbles something and goes back to reading. Shen Yuan suppresses the curses threatening to come out of his mouth, since it would be a hassle to lodge a complaint against the disciple and would most likely leave a smudge on Shen Yuan's reputation — at least in Qiong Ding.

With a strain on his arms and an irritation deep enough to fuel his body to move faster, Shen Yuan follows down the hallway until he finds the fourth room. The door is closed, forcing Shen Yuan to fiddle with the handle using his pinky finger — which is easier said than done, at least with ancient door handles.

It takes a minute, but Shen Yuan successfully opens the door and is greeted with a large room, only illuminated by a medium-sized window at the corner. It is a little dustier than Shen Yuan had expected of a Qiong Ding storage facility, and considerably unorganized too; Shen Yuan is willing to bet it can be traced to the disciple reading porn at the entrance. Maybe this is a less used storage deposit, which explains why no one has caught onto the disciple's slack.

Shen Yuan finds the empty shelf after another minute of searching; to his absolute dismay, the shelf is basically on the same height as his head, which is a terrible height to place a storage shelf, especially with the amount of clutter on the ground. This is a worker's union lawsuit on plain sight! Luckily for Cang Qiong, the disciples and seniors do not have an union, but Shen Yuan will definitely propose the idea if the opportunity arises.

Breathing in and out, Shen Yuan conjures all the strength in his body for this maneuver. He only needs to raise the box high enough to prop its edge against the shelf, and then he can push it and go back to his merry life grinding medicine at Qian Cao. With enough perseverance, Shen Yuan can do this!

Raising it to his chest is a challenge, and getting it to the shelf's height is borderline torture. Once it reaches above Shen Yuan's mouth, he tries to adjust his hand's placement on the box to make it easier to prop it upwards.

Unfortunately, Shen Yuan's balance is once again trying to kill him, as the crate on his hands threatens to slip and Shen Yuan frantically tries to shift his weight to regain balance. His left foot lands on a scroll, and his ankle decides it wants to bend just the right way to send a shockwave of pain through Shen Yuan's body and an ungraceful yelp through his mouth.

As Shen Yuan closes his eyes and waits for the painful impact against the wooden floor, a hand is wrapped against his waist once again.

I swear to god, if this is Shang Qinghua- Shen Yuan thinks, only for his thoughts to abruptly stop as he opens his eyes and is met with a familiar face standing *way too close* to him.

"Shen-shidi," Yue Qingyuan says, a worried expression on his face as he holds Shen Yuan's waist with one hand and the wooden crate with another, supporting it against the shelf. "Is shidi well?"

Truthfully, Shen Yuan is too shocked by the situation to immediately answer. Isn't this too much of a cheesy drama scene? There's barely a palm's width of distance between their faces, to the point Shen Yuan must be literally breathing the same air as the Qiong Ding Head Disciple. Also, what is up with people grabbing his waist — it is the second time it has happened in less than an hour!

"I- This one is fine," Shen Yuan stutters, feeling his cheeks heat up with the proximity. Besides, how can he not be flustered when he can literally feel Yue Qingyuan's hand warmth on his waist?! "This one has merely lost his balance temporarily-"

As Shen Yuan moves his foot to stand by himself again, a sudden pain shoots from his ankle up his leg. A hiss comes out of his mouth instinctively, which causes Yue Qingyuan's worried frown to deepen. The Qiong Ding Head Disciple pushes the batch of medicine on the shelf with one move, freeing his other hand to assist Shen Yuan to sit down on the floor.

"Where does it hurt?" Yue Qingyuan asks, clearing the surrounding area of clutter to give more space for Shen Yuan.

"...I must have twisted my ankle," Shen Yuan mutters, trying to get a feel of the skin surrounding it as he takes off his worn-out boots. As expected, it is inflamed and very sensitive to the touch, which causes another hiss to leave his mouth as he feels it. "Thankfully, it isn't broken, so this one should be able to make it back to Qian Cao with no issue-"

"It would be ridiculous of this shixiong to let shidi return by himself like this," Yue Qingyuan interjects, looking at the other with a stern expression. "What if Shen-shidi loses his balance and hurts himself further?"

Shen Yuan doesn't know what to say in response to that — and saying he has almost fallen off the rainbow bridge today but survived isn't the greatest choice.

"...Then this shidi will wait until it is less swollen to return," Shen Yuan yields in defeat, hoping his stay at Qiong Ding will be brief and devoid of any more drama.

【 Yue Qingyuan is glad to spend more time with User. +10 Affection Points added to 'Qiong Ding's Head Disciple, Yue Qingyuan'. 】

【 Quest 'Deliver the supplies to Qiong Ding' successfully completed! +100 R-Points, +15 Affection Points added to 'Qiong Ding's Head Disciple, Yue Qingyuan'. 】

Yue Qingyuan smiles warmly, making Shen Yuan's heart skip a beat. *I must be nervous,* he thinks to himself — of course Shen Yuan is nervous, what else can it be!

"It must be this shixiong's luck that his schedule has been cleared for today," the Qiong Ding Head Disciple replies. "Does Shen-shidi want to take a look at Qiong Ding's scenery? This one knows a few spots that will surely impress shidi."

Of course the future Sect Leader has a clear schedule today, Shen Yuan cries in his mind at the poor writing that reeks of Airplane. Whatever the logic behind Yue Qingyuan's convenient break from learning how to run the sect, Shen Yuan senses an opportunity from this — he can pry a little bit about the Qiong Ding's Head Disciple life, learn about his personality and perhaps gain a few extra affection points while he's at it.

Shen Yuan smiles back. "This shidi would love to."

Yue Qingyuan nods, raising from the ground at the same time Shen Yuan starts to grab on the nearby wall to raise as well, expecting to find the head disciple's hand ready to help him out — but being met with an unexpected action instead.

One second, Shen Yuan is on the ground, and a blink later, he feels a hand propping against his back and another holding the back of his knees, and just like that, he's taller than he has ever been before. Letting out an exclamation at the sudden action, Shen Yuan looks up to find Yue Qingyuan looking back.

"Apologies, but shidi will worsen his injury if he walks on his own," the head disciple states, talking as if Shen Yuan just lost his foot or something.

I just twisted my ankle, what is the need for a bridal carry!!!!!! Shen Yuan cries mentally, but makes no other sounds besides embarrassed grunts as he tries to find any way to hide his face. He might be in an otome game, but it doesn't mean he will ever get used to these shenanigans that would never happen in real life.

As they walk through the hallway and into the entrance room of the storage facility, the disciple from before drops his book on the ground as he watches the scene unfolding. Yue Qingyuan gives the disciple a side glance colder than a thousand winters — which contrasts a lot with the warm, trustworthy persona Shen Yuan has associated with the head disciple. *He is supposed to be the most respected cultivator in the realm,* Shen Yuan reminds himself. Besides, the disciple absolutely deserves the side glance! If he had bothered doing his job, then the storage room wouldn't be filled with dust and random stuff on the ground!

Watching as they approach the door, Shen Yuan closes his eyes and hides as much of his reddened face as possible. As the light hits his eyelids and the gasps start echoing through the vast courtyard, Shen Yuan opens his eyes by instinct, his mind too curious to miss out on his own despair. His eyes flicker through the crowds for a brief second before making their way to Yue Qingyuan, who looks oddly unbothered by the amount of attention they are receiving. The head disciple looks back at Shen Yuan, giving him a warm smile once again and causing the other's face to go even more red.

Ignoring all the stares and looking towards the head disciple's chest, Shen Yuan prays this humiliation will be worth the incoming affection points.

Chapter 7: do NOT try to reason with the scum villain

Chapter Notes

> hello!! how are you guys doing? here i am with another chapter after a thousand years of not updating the fic, and i fear my excuse this time isn't as weird this time (brain just didn't want to write and refused to work whenever i opened the doc), but anyways, i hope u guys like it!!!
> also, thank you guys so much for the nice comments eheheh even if i take a while to answer, please know i always read and appreciate them!!
> anyways, thank you all once again for reading and i hope u guys enjoy the chapter <3
> bluesky (i'm not rlly using that other godforsaken app): shiyooji.bsky.social

Shen Yuan doesn't dare look around until he feels his body being lowered onto a cool surface.

Adjusting against the stone bench, he mutters a barely audible thanks to Yue Qingyuan, who lets out a light laugh and sits next to Shen Yuan. Not ready to face the Qiong Ding Head Disciple yet, Shen Yuan instead focuses on the environment around them; the lush grass and foliage scattered around the place, concentrated mostly around the scintillating pond, the maple trees surrounding the space, with their bright red leaves oddly lively and intact considering it is almost winter.

Yue Qingyuan doesn't immediately attempt to start a conversation, letting Shen Yuan continue to admire the scenery while quietly observing him. Shen Yuan, while still embarrassed by the 'princess carry' situation, is thankful that the head disciple doesn't mind a little bit of comfortable silence.

A single lotus flower floats atop the clear water, surrounded by water lilies and duckweed, seemingly undeterred by the cold weather. Looking around the area again, Shen Yuan notices the strange amount of terrestrial flowers also in bloom. Curiosity slowly overcomes Shen Yuan's awkwardness.

"How are the flowers able to bloom even during winter?" he asks, wondering what methods could have been used. Considering Airplane's messy cultivation system and awkward explanations of the world's properties, it could be anything.

"It is due to an array made for them to withstand the colder seasons," Yue Qingyuan replies, looking at the pond for a brief moment before his eyes wander to the grassy surface filled with flowers. "If not, all but one would die once winter arrives."

"All but one…?" Shen Yuan mutters, following Yue Qingyuan's gaze that is fixed upon a white, upright flower that stands lonely in its surroundings. It's a lily-of-the-valley, Shen

Yuan observes.

“It withstands the harshest of winters, even without much sunlight,” the head disciple says with a pensive voice. “While the other flowers wither in the same condition, this one can survive and bloom as beautifully as ever, even when surrounded by destruction.”

Shen Yuan has a feeling that Yue Qingyuan isn’t really talking about flowers right now, and without knowing what to answer, the other hesitates before speaking.

“Thanks to Yue-shixiong, it won’t be as lonely anymore,” Shen Yuan says, hoping his answer is appropriate for whatever metaphor is going on inside the Qiong Ding Head Disciple’s mind. “Besides, it carries a nice meaning. It symbolizes the return of happiness.”

Also, it’s very poisonous and can kill someone if ingested, but it would be inappropriate for Shen Yuan to say this right now.

A melancholic smile appears in the head disciple’s face, making Shen Yuan freeze for a second as he wonders if he said the wrong thing, until a familiar chime echoes through his mind.

【 Yue Qingyuan appreciates User’s words. Special Attribute ‘Comfort’ increased to 3%. +15 Affection Points. 】

It’s difficult to conceal the absolute shock Shen Yuan feels as he reads the System’s notification. He wasn’t expecting to figure out Yue Qingyuan’s Special Attribute, much less for it to be something so… pitiful. For someone as surrounded by others who admire and aspire to be like him, isn’t it strange to feel as touched by something like being comforted?

Still, Shen Yuan can’t help but empathize with the situation. Loneliness isn’t just being physically alone; it is the agonizing feeling of being disconnected from the world around you, watching it go on regardless of your feelings. It is the terrifying realization that there’s no one who actually understands you, even if they do their best to lend their support.

It is difficult to continue life as usual once you understand the world you see isn’t the world others experience.

“Is that so?” Yue Qingyuan says, turning his gaze away from the flower to the other disciple. “This one is not very knowledgeable on flower language.”

“There’s not much this shidi knows, either,” Shen Yuan replies, continuing to stare at the flower. “It so happens this flower is my sister’s favorite, and she has… *had* a knack for yapping about whatever facts she could memorize.”

The sentence leaves a bitter taste in Shen Yuan’s mouth, the corrections he had to make when talking about his family amplifying the empty space in his heart. There is no Shen family in this world; they have been brutally mauled by beasts, their mangled bodies left to burn at the remains of the village he’s supposed to have grown up in. They are nothing more than bits of code and dialogue, unlike Shen Yuan’s loving home waiting for him to return.

Yue Qingyuan notices the shift in atmosphere that comes with Shen Yuan's words and gives him a small, comforting smile. "Shidi must have been very close with his sister. This one is sure she must be happy to see shidi doing so well in Cang Qiong."

Shen Yuan feels his breath stop for a second. He's not sure what exactly it is he's feeling — is it sadness, anxiety, anger, confusion, or a mix of it all?

Would his sister be happy to see Shen Yuan here? The logical answer is that it isn't possible, because she doesn't know he's here. For all Shen Yuan knows, his body might be laying motionless in a hospital bed, surrounded by machines and tubes trying to keep him alive while he wanders around trying to get back. This isn't real; she can't be happy for something that isn't true.

Things here might feel real, but in the end, this is a game. A game Shen Yuan will beat, so he can return to his quiet reality.

"Maybe," Shen Yuan quietly replies, settling for a neutral answer as to not fuck up his progressing dialogue with Yue Qingyuan. Turning towards the head disciple, he asks. "What about shixiong? Are you close with your family?"

A somber expression passes through Yue Qingyuan's face for a moment so brief Shen Yuan barely registers it before it's gone. *Did I ask the wrong question…?* Perhaps Yue Qingyuan doesn't get along with his family — truthfully, they weren't really mentioned in PIDW, so Shen Yuan has been curious to learn about it for a long time.

"Not quite," the head disciple replies, a strange melancholic look in his eyes as he speaks. "It is complicated."

Shit, shit, I need to change the subject…! "Ah, Yue-shixiong doesn't need to answer if he doesn't want to! Apologies for asking so abruptly…"

"Shen-shidi needn't apologize," Yue Qingyuan softly replies. "It is only natural shidi would ask about it after talking about his own family."

Shen Yuan mentally lets out a sigh of relief. At least Yue Qingyuan isn't angry, so this conversation is still salvageable — the issue is, Shen Yuan has no clue what to say! It is already awkward as it is, so of course his socially inept ass can't come up with a topic that isn't the weather!

Thankfully for Shen Yuan, Yue Qingyuan is great at noticing small social cues. "Ah, this shixiong remembers shidi mentioning a bestiary he looked forward to reading last time we spoke. Did shidi manage to borrow it from Qing Jing's library?"

Unfortunately, Shen Yuan can't say he has not gone there yet because he's afraid of meeting Shen Qingqiu, so he awkwardly laughs and avoids his gaze. "...Not yet. This past week has been a little… hectic, I guess."

Honestly, Shen Yuan expects Yue Qingyuan to answer with an awkward 'oh, I see' of sorts, considering everyone in Cang Qiong seems to know what happened that night; Yue Qingyuan

seems like the type of guy to not ask if Shen Yuan looks uncomfortable enough, so perhaps he won't try to pry about it — and maybe he won't want to pry, since it sort of involves Shen Qingqiu as well.

"Did something happen?" the head disciple asks, and Shen Yuan looks up to find a genuinely confused Yue Qingyuan staring back.

How does he not know???? Shen Yuan screams internally, staring back with undisguised surprise at the Qiong Ding Head Disciple. Shen Yuan can excuse Liu Qingge not knowing about it a day after it had happened — especially since it looked like the Bai Zhan Head Disciple headed straight to Qian Cao after returning from his fight with the beast. Yue Qingyuan, however, has no excuse!

"...Yue-shixiong hasn't heard about it?" Shen Yuan asks, trying to confirm if the head disciple actually hasn't been paying attention to the latest hot gossip in Cang Qiong. Shaking his head, Yue Qingyuan seems a bit confused by the statement, so Shen Yuan quietly sighs and decides to explain it as briefly as possible. "A Bai Zhan disciple tried stabbing me while he was having a qi deviation."

Tried and succeeded, Shen Yuan remarks to himself. Thinking about it makes a spark of discomfort spread through his abdomen.

"Someone tried to stab you?!" Yue Qingyuan exclaims, so surprised he drops the honorifics and usual politeness. Maybe Shen Yuan shouldn't have been so brief… "Is shidi injured?"

"I- This one is fine," Shen Yuan quickly replies, still a bit shocked that Yue Qingyuan truly hadn't heard of the situation. Does he work nonstop unless Shen Yuan or Shen Qingqiu is within a 100m radius of him? "This shidi dodged in time."

"Which Bai Zhan disciple did it?" the head disciple asks with a worried tone, which makes Shen Yuan feel a cold shiver down his spine.

Yue Qingyuan isn't stupid, and has most likely heard of Shen Qingqiu's feud with Ji Jue; from what Shen Yuan gathered, they have been beefing with each other for quite some time. PIDW mentioned a few times the sect leader knew of Shen Qingqiu's dastardly acts, so why wouldn't he know of those conducted during the Qing Jing Peak Lord's disciple days?

Besides, it wouldn't take a genius to connect the dots, and Yue Qingyuan would figure it out sooner or later. So, Shen Yuan quietly prays for his affection points and hopes this won't anger Shen Qingqiu somehow — Shen Yuan isn't interested in becoming the protagonist ruthlessly bullied by the scum villain, thank you very much!

"If this one recalls correctly, his name is Ji Jue…" Shen Yuan cautiously replies, watching as the color seems to fade from the Qiong Ding Head Disciple's face. Panicking, he quickly continues. "B-but it's all fine now! Ji-shixiong was having a qi deviation and was not in his right mind, and thankfully Mu-shixiong was there so the situation was solved smoothly…!"

Seconds feel like minutes as Yue Qingyuan stays silent, his expression frozen in a way that screams trouble for Shen Yuan. Why did he have to mention he had a rough week? If Shen

Yuan had kept quiet, then Yue Qingyuan wouldn't have asked, and perhaps would have missed the rumors going around for enough days to pass until the Cang Qiong gossip club found a newer scandal.

The frozen expression changes into an apologetic one so fast Shen Yuan almost misses it. "This shixiong is glad the situation has been settled… However, as Qiong Ding's Head Disciple, this one wishes to apologize for the sect's inability to keep Shen-shidi safe."

Before the head disciple can rise from the stone bench to bow, Shen Yuan frantically reaches for his arm. There is no way in hell Shen Yuan is about to allow the future sect leader to apologize for this, lest he gets a bounty issued by Shen Qingqiu on his head!

Yue Qingyaun freezes, looking back at the other with a surprised expression. Shen Yuan ignores the anxious pounding in his chest and tries to speak calmly. "It is not the sect or Yue-shixiong's failure; we are trained in case such situations arise in Qian Cao. This one is alive and uninjured because the sect is prepared to deal with it so well."

Shen Yuan feels his heart pounding as he lies; he's alive because he died and knew when to dodge, but even that is not something to blame Yue Qingyuan for. However, the Qiong Ding Head Disciple doesn't need to know it, and neither should he — Shen Yuan knows it is not because of any potential injuries that Yue Qingyuan is apologizing for.

【 Yue Qingyuan feels better after hearing User's words. Special Attribute 'Comfort' increased to 4%. +5 Affection Points. 】

"Does Shen-shidi believe so…?" Yue Qingyuan quietly asks, his voice lower than usual as the head disciple seems deep in thought.

Nodding, Shen Yuan relaxes just a tiny bit as he notices the head disciple's complexion looks better and his eyes don't look as melancholic. A huge bullet has been dodged; Yue Qingyuan won't feel bad about something that isn't his fault, therefore Shen Qingqiu will have no reason to be insufferable to Shen Yuan (for now), and the Qiong Ding Head Disciple isn't the type of person to question Shen Qingqiu about his behavior, which avoids another nuclear-level threat from the Qing Jing Head Disciple.

Yue Qingyuan doesn't ask anything else, and neither does Shen Yuan. While the silence between them isn't what Shen Yuan had envisioned for this meeting, it felt right not to push for anything else at the moment. At least the Qiong Ding Head Disciple seemed to be feeling better, which takes another problem off Shen Yuan's ever-growing list and gives him some time to simply stop for a few minutes.

Amidst the blossoming flowers and peaceful silence, Shen Yuan feels at ease for the first time since waking up in this place.

It takes another week for Shen Yuan to gather enough willpower to drag himself to Qing Jing.

Truthfully, he had been delaying this moment from the day he arrived back from Qiong Ding after an awkward but somewhat nice moment with Yue Qingyuan — Shen Yuan told himself he would go there the next day, and then 'today' turned into 'tomorrow' for the next five days… Until he checked the time left for his inner disciple task to expire and found out he has 39 days left, which gave Shen Yuan enough energy to go.

Since Mu Qingfang is still out in some sort of mission and Shen Yuan didn't feel like adventuring outside of Qian Cao's boundaries, he did not meet any other male lead; maybe the System felt remorseful enough to give Shen Yuan a break, but he knows the damn thing wouldn't do something so nice — no, this is surely the calm before the storm!

Even with every alarm blasting inside Shen Yuan's head, he knows he cannot delay his Qing Jing visit any further. He needs to have some notion of how long it will take to master his Herbology skill, at least so he will feel calmer as he watches the days passing by; whatever 'punishment' the System is talking about must be something straight out of an ancient torturer's handbook.

Or straight out of Airplane's disturbed mind. Actually, that might be worse.

Shen Yuan has repeated his current plan at least a hundred times in his mind — walk to Qing Jing, find the library as quickly as possible (even if it means asking for directions), borrow the book and immediately go back. Since he chose to go in the middle of the afternoon, Shen Yuan is sure Shen Qingqiu must be busy with some head disciple duty, be it directing lessons, dealing with documents or whatever they do in that peak.

The System may try its best to shove the scum villain towards Shen Yuan's way, and for that, he has an answer: wearing the most low-key robes he has + a simple face veil he bought from the System shop for 70 R-Points. Yes, Shen Yuan had been saving his points for another 2x skill boost, but if 70 points are the price to pay in return for the scum villain not recognizing Shen Yuan and immediately antagonizing him for getting along with Yue Qingyuan, then so be it!

A lot of what Shen Yuan is planning has been based on conjecture — after all, he hasn't met Shen Qingqiu, but he has read PIDW in great detail and is deeply familiar with the Qing Jing Head Disciple's game.

Shen Qingqiu is, at the core, a deeply insecure man. It is the reason why no one likes him, and the reason why he bullied a literal child for years — Luo Binghe is too talented, and shines even when hardships are thrown his way without pause! Shen Qingqiu, being the miserable fuck he is, decided this was enough reason to ruin a child's life and attempt murder once the opportunity presented itself.

So, until Shen Yuan has picked a route, why should he stir up potential trouble with Shen Qingqiu? Shen Yuan doesn't even know if he will romance Yue Qingyuan yet. Therefore, he will stay as far away as possible and avoid all contact with the Qing Jing Head Disciple unless necessary.

Hiding near Qian Cao's entrance, Shen Yuan looks around to make sure no one is looking before he puts on the veil. It covers enough to hide most of his features, leaving mostly the

upper part of his face visible — Liu Mingyan style, which is where Shen Yuan got the idea from.

No one pays him much mind as Shen Yuan makes his way through the rainbow bridge. There are some curious onlookers, but not as many as usual; most people shoot him a glance and quickly look away, unlike whenever Shen Yuan's godforsaken semblance to the Qing Jing Head Disciple is noticed.

Proudly smiling under the veil, Shen Yuan mentally pats himself in the back for his foolproof plan.

The walk to Qing Jing takes less time than expected, perhaps because no male lead is around to save Shen Yuan from another generic soap opera accident. Shen Yuan is glad and concerned at the same time… Things cannot be calm for so long, after all.

Once the grand and majestic gates of Qing Jing are in front of him, Shen Yuan stops for a second and breathes in. He will enter, ask for the location of the library, grab his book and leave; nothing more, nothing less.

With a newfound burst of energy, Shen Yuan walks through the Qing Jing gates as confidently as possible, and immediately approaches the first disciple he can find.

The confidence only lasts for a few seconds as the Qing Jing disciple shoots the nastiest glare Shen Yuan has seen before as he approaches. Shen Yuan gulps and tries to maintain his calm. "Excuse me, could shixiong please tell this one where to find the library?"

Eyeing him from head to toe, the disciple makes an annoyed expression before answering. "Left to the poetry pavilion."

Before Shen Yuan can ask where the poetry pavilion is, the disciple turns around and leaves while muttering something under his breath. Shen Yuan is appalled, for the lack of a better word; is it so hard to tell him where to go?!

Turning towards the next Qing Jing who happens to be near, Shen Yuan approaches with a smile. "Hello, could shixiong tell this shidi where…"

The disciple doesn't even bother looking at Shen Yuan. "Ask elsewhere, I'm late for my swordsman practice."

Once again, the disciple leaves without looking back at Shen Yuan's baffled expression. He knows Qing Jing disciples are known to be snobs, but isn't this a bit too much…? Perhaps it is because they are all inner disciples, so they don't want to waste their time with him.

Unwilling to give up, Shen Yuan keeps the strained smile on his face as he approaches yet another disciple, this time an outer disciple, from his robes.

"Apologies, but would shixiong be kind enough to tell this one where to find the library-"

"Why are you in my way? Go find it yourself!" the outer disciple sneers, raising his nose as he brushes against Shen Yuan rudely. "These Qian Cao folk, spreading all sorts of ailments

without a care!”

Is it because of the veil?! Shen Yuan turns around to correct the Qing Jing disciple and explain he’s not sick, but the disciple is already walking far ahead of where Shen Yuan is. Can’t people be mysterious beauties without being accused of spreading illnesses? Besides, even if Shen Yuan was sick, there’s no need for these people to be so rude to him!

Raising his head with a sneer in his face, Shen Yuan turns to the opposite direction of the disciple and starts walking down a pathway. If no one wants to tell him, then he’s going to find it himself!

The pathway is basically empty, which upon further thinking, Shen Yuan realizes is not ideal if he wants to find a specific place — he can’t even follow those snobs until he figures out where the library is. Shen Yuan, however, is not a quitter, so he continues to walk down the dirt pathway that eventually becomes so separated from the main Qing Jing areas that the only things visible are rows of trees and bamboo stalks.

To be fair, it is a beautiful path. The cold autumn breeze is mild enough to not make Shen Yuan shiver, and the fresh scent of bamboo leaves is even more soothing than the scent of Qian Cao’s morning dewy grass. There’s no chatter from bored disciples to be heard, only the whistling of leaves rustling against each other and Shen Yuan’s quiet steps.

Shen Yuan walks for about five minutes, not finding a single indication of where the library can possibly be at. Sighing, he ponders whether to turn around and go back to the entrance, until a sudden noise reaches his ears.

It seems to be coming from there, Shen Yuan notes as he peeks through the bamboo stalks, seeing two blurry figures in light turquoise garments — Qing Jing disciples, without a doubt. Shen Yuan knows he shouldn’t eavesdrop on someone else’s argument, but how can he resist the temptation of watching a good fight and learning some gossip to share with Han-shijie?

Quietly, Shen Yuan hides behind a bush within earshot that gives him a good view of what’s going on. There’s two disciples; one wearing inner disciple robes, and the other wearing what must be Qing Jing’s swordsman training robes, cleaning his sword as if nothing is going on. The latter is turned just enough for his face to be covered, while the former seems oddly similar yet difficult for Shen Yuan to point where he knows the disciple from.

“You dare ignore me when Fu-shidi has already told us all he saw you?” The inner disciple exclaims, his face distorted with anger and irritation. “Your presence only brings disgrace to Qing Jing and Shizun! If you don’t leave in three days, you shall regret it!”

The other disciple stops cleaning his blade, quietly breathing in and out as if trying to calm himself before he looks towards the inner disciple. “How so?”

Shen Yuan barely contains the gasp about to leave his mouth as the mysterious disciple’s voice echoes through the small grove, melodic yet chilling as he replies with an inquiring tone. The inner disciple stares at the other as if he’s insane and scoffs, but his trembling hands don’t escape Shen Yuan’s eyes.

“How else if not by telling everyone you’ve been going to that filthy place? You loiter all night with those prostitutes and even dare go into that place wearing Qing Jing’s colors! How utterly shameless…”

As the inner disciple approaches the other, probably in an attempt to intimidate him, Shen Yuan peeks his head through the bushes a little more to catch a glimpse of the inner disciple’s face. It is then that Shen Yuan realizes where he knows him from; this is the Qing Jing disciple that visited the emergency ward a few weeks ago with all sorts of venereal diseases!

You literally aced the sexually transmitted diseases checklist and you’re talking about other people???

Bewildered, the inner disciple looks around in a panic. “Who dares utter such slanderous lies?!”

Oh fuck, Shen Yuan thinks to himself as he freezes in place. The other disciple chuckles, watching amused as the inner disciple’s face grows increasingly red. Shen Yuan wonders if it would be possible to somehow run before they see who he is…

Before he can put his plan in action, a sudden breeze knocks over the bush he’s hiding at, and as a bonus, takes away Shen Yuan’s veil that he spent 70 R-Points with, because Shen Yuan can’t have nice things. For a few seconds, there’s a staring showdown between him, squatting on the floor, the inner disciple, looking absolutely bamboozled, and the other disciple, who turns his face just enough to take a glance at Shen Yuan.

He looks an awful lot like Shen Yuan, but with sharper features and eyes that might cut through someone’s soul.

“You… You’re that Qian Cao disciple!” The inner disciple screams in surprise. He then looks at the other disciple, anger and embarrassment visible in his face as his feet start to back away from the scene. His eyes flicker between both men. “This isn’t over, Shen Qingqiu! And you, Qian Cao brat, I’ll be lodging a complaint for your insolent behavior!”

With a face redder than a tomato, the inner disciple turns and leaves in a hurry. Meanwhile, Shen Yuan is stuck in place, his brain replaying the disciple’s words over and over again as he looks towards the other disciple, who now turns to face him with his annoyingly pretty face.

Of all people, I defended Shen Qingqiu, Shen Yuan cries in horror to himself. Why is the Qing Jing Head Disciple in the middle of Qing Jing’s terribly large forests precisely when Shen Yuan is passing through?!

This is an otome game, yes, but Shen Yuan still isn’t used to the fact Shen Qingqiu is also a love interest. Besides, Shen Yuan only defended him by accident because he spoke without noticing — and he also thinks that inner disciple is a hypocrite if he’s criticizing anyone over going to brothels, even if that person is Shen Qingqiu.

“Will you keep staring or will you say something?” Shen Qingqiu asks, looking down at Shen Yuan with an annoyed expression. “Now that you have heard all you wanted, scurry back to

whichever sick house you came from."

Shen Yuan's brain seems to wake up with the Qing Jing Head Disciple's words. Raising from the ground, he quickly wipes away the dirt from his clothes and bows his head. Gritting his teeth, Shen Yuan holds back all insults he wants to throw at the snobbish head disciple; making Shen Qingqiu his enemy will only bring unnecessary trouble for Shen Yuan, so he will apologize and run back to Qian Cao as soon as possible, even if it means bribing one of his shijies to grab the bestiary for him.

"This one apologizes for his behavior. It was not this one's intention to eavesdrop on Head Disciple Shen's conversation, this one happened to get lost while trying to find the library…" Shen Yuan mutters, trying to speak clearly so as to not show fear or weakness. Still, he does not dare look up from the ground.

Shen Qingqiu is like a snake; lower your guard just a bit and you'll be met with fangs bearing the most poisonous of venoms.

An uninterested 'tsk' echoes through the place, and Shen Yuan briefly believes he has avoided a huge bullet. That is, until the head disciple goes quiet for a few seconds and Shen Yuan starts hearing steps coming his direction. Dried bamboo leaves crunch under the head disciple's boots until he stops in front of the other.

"Wait. Raise your head," Shen Qingqiu commands, his overbearing gaze raining down on Shen Yuan so strongly it makes him shiver.

I am so utterly fucked, Shen Yuan thinks to himself, but nevertheless raises his head slowly, eventually meeting the Qing Jing Head Disciple's piercing green eyes.

A scowl forms on the head disciple's face. "You are the cheap imitation the oathbreaker hangs out with."

Shen Yuan can't help the incredulous exclamation that comes out of his mouth. "Excuse me?!"

Is Shen Qingqiu really this childish? This is 5th grade level bullying!

"Are you hard of hearing or are you simply stupid?" Shen Qingqiu mocks, glaring with such vitriol and hatred it makes Shen Yuan wonder how the hell this man is a romantic option. "Or perhaps our little imitation does not know it yet? Head Disciple Yue is interested in you because-"

"Of course I know that," Shen Yuan interrupts, watching as Shen Qingqiu widens his eyes in surprise for a second before his face goes back to its hateful self. Shen Yuan lets out a sigh as he feels a headache forming. "Look, I get why you're pissed off. I don't know what the relationship between you both is, and, to be honest, I'd also be weirded out if this happened to me. However, I'd recommend talking to Yue-shixiong instead of doing whatever you're trying to accomplish here."

Truthfully, Shen Yuan has thrown his fate to the heavens after this one. Shen Qingqiu obviously wants a fight, and Shen Yuan can't be bothered to deliver it to him — because he agrees that Yue Qingyuan's behavior is weird as hell! Shen Yuan doesn't expect the Qing Jing Head Disciple to suddenly grow a conscience and apologize to him, but he'd be content if Shen Qingqiu notices he's not trying to steal the Qiong Ding Head Disciple or whatever.

Shen Yuan is so out of options after suffering this blatant attempt at bullying that he can only try to be honest and pray to the heavens that Shen Qingqiu will leave him alone.

"You… You…" Shen Qingqiu mutters, seemingly unable to find a fitting answer to Shen Yuan's sudden honesty. Scowling harder than ever, the head disciple turns his head arrogantly as he tries not to look embarrassed he has been left speechless. "Are you perhaps attempting to gain my favor? If so, it is utterly foolish of you-"

"Why would I want your favor?" Shen Yuan mutters, paling as he notices he said such words out loud. He must salvage this situation before it turns irreparable… "What this one means is… There's better ways to gain Shen-shixiong's favor or use his name to my advantage, but this shidi would rather not do such things."

Shen Qingqiu's scowl does not go away, but it doesn't intensify either. Shen Yuan considers it a win.

Both men stay silent, with the Qing Jing Head Disciple staring so intensely at Shen Yuan he might accidentally cut through his body with those eyes. At this point, there isn't much Shen Yuan can do — he's already laid out his honest thoughts, and it is solely up to Shen Qingqiu to decide if he believes him or not.

"…What better ways?" Shen Qingqiu suddenly asks, breaking the awkward silence with an unexpected question.

Widening his eyes as the head disciple speaks, Shen Yuan quickly collects himself as the other glares judgingly, and starts speaking. "This one would probably claim to be a distant relative of Head Disciple Shen, perhaps also come up with a story if anyone were to question its validity. Something like being from a disgraced branch family could work…"

Shen Qingqiu lets out a breath, maybe even something that can be interpreted as a chuckle — that sounds more ironic than Shen Yuan expected. Still, the head disciple's humor clearly hasn't risen much, although not as explicitly antagonistic as before.

"How lucky you haven't ended up in Qing Jing," Shen Qingqiu bitterly mutters under his breath, barely audible to Shen Yuan. Before the other can answer, the head disciple looks up with an indifferent expression and continues. "Why haven't you done so? Is *Shen-shidi* so disgusted at the thought of having his name tied to-"

"Do you want me to say yes?" Shen Yuan annoyedly interrupts, the frustration clear in his voice. *It's impossible to reason with this toddler!* "Maybe I don't want to do it because it would be wrong!"

Also sort of useless, considering your shit reputation, Shen Yuan remarks mentally. Of course, Shen Qingqiu is going to become Qing Jing's Peak Lord, but at the current time, he's still a head disciple who could be demoted if he fucks it up enough to get the current Qing Jing Peak Lord pissed off. From the time Shen Yuan has spent here, it became crystal clear that most disciples believe it is only a matter of time until it happens.

Unfortunately, Shen Qingqiu is indeed going to take the position, and will be making everyone's life miserable because he himself is a pathetic loser. How would it ever be excusable to bully a literal child — that you were supposed to be a tutor of — because you're jealous of them?

Shen Yuan's mental rant is interrupted by a 'tsk' that comes out of the head disciple's mouth as he turns his head away.

"If you say so," Shen Qingqiu dismissively replies, clearly pissed off he hasn't gotten the fight he wanted. The Qing Jing Head Disciple then turns around, not sparing a glance towards Shen Yuan. "There are better things this one could be doing instead of wasting my time here. Farewell, I suppose."

With that, Shen Qingqiu starts walking away in hurried steps, almost as if trying to run away from the argument he did not manage to win. Shen Yuan holds back an annoyed sigh; this man truly is a toddler, how is he competent enough to take care of a whole administrative entity and heaven knows how many wards under his care?

Shen Yuan looks around the small grove as the head disciple walks away, trying to find his very expensive veil and barely managing to hold back a curse as it seems to have flown away to heaven knows where. Is he supposed to be stuck in the middle of Qing Jing without knowing where to go and while looking like he might be related to their insufferable head disciple?!

Suddenly, a voice speaks from the path leading further into the bamboo grove. "Also, keep walking down the path and turn right to reach the library."

Shen Yuan stares at the Qing Jing Head Disciple with utter surprise in his eyes. However, before their eyes can meet, Shen Qingqiu turns his head away, continuing his walk/run up the path without saying another word. The only thing Shen Yuan can catch a glimpse of is a slight red tint to the head disciple's ears, strongly contrasting against his pale skin.

Before Shen Yuan has a chance to process what is going on, the System decides to chime in.

【 Shen Qingqiu thinks User is annoying. +4 Affection Points added to 'Qing Jing's Head Disciple, Shen Qingqiu'. 】

4 affection points? Usually I get at least 5 for most interactions…

【 User is granted a special 20% deduction of affection points for character 'Shen Qingqiu' not given to other players. Trigger: 30% appearance resemblance to character 'Shen Qingqiu'. 】

Wanting to bash his head against the nearest rock, Shen Yuan tries to make sense of the deduction. Why would he get less points for looking like Shen Qingqiu? For all he hates to admit it, the man is one of the most gorgeous people he's ever seen, and he's seen Liu Qingge before! If any deduction has to be made, why isn't it for being somewhat close to Yue Qingyuan?! Does Shen Qingqiu hate his own appearance so badly?!

It doesn't make sense, at least with what Shen Yuan knows of Shen Qingqiu — yes, that man is insanely petty and insecure, but even he must know he's drop dead gorgeous! PIDW wasn't exactly filled with excellent character building, but this somehow makes even less sense than Shen Qingqiu's negative IQ plans whenever Luo Binghe is his target.

Whatever, I don't care, Shen Yuan tries to convince himself, ignoring the curiosity that is slowly eating away at his thoughts. Following the Qing Jing Head Disciple's instructions, Shen Yuan walks down the path and turns right, finding the library with ease — and barely having enough time to appreciate the grand, majestic building in front of him before the surrounding Qing Jing disciples start to gossip. Shen Yuan decides he has dealt with enough stress for the day, and starts following the path down Qing Jing Peak so he can quickly go back to Qian Cao.

Shen Yuan leaves Qing Jing with more questions about Shen Qingqiu than before, and no books to study with.

Chapter 8: do not share private information to accidentally defend the scum villain

Chapter Notes

hello!! how is everyone doing?? once again, this chapter took longer than expected, but for more common reasons like creative block… and also my liver trying to kill me because i drank two alcoholic drinks! in any case, i'm fine and ao3's author curse will not bring me down this time >:)
btw, THANK U GUYS SO MUCH FOR 1K KUDOS OMFGNSUFHBDSHFBASUYFGVSJFS I LOVE U GUYS SO MUCHJ!!! thank you so much for reading and supporting the fic, i really cannot put into words how happy this makes me 🥹
hope u guys enjoy the chapter!!! <333

bluesky: shiyooji.bsky.social

A day after going to Qing Jing, Shen Yuan realizes he fucked up for real.

Placing a thousand curses upon his big mouth and his own stupidity, Shen Yuan prays he won't be expelled from Qian Cao. He knows it is unlikely, especially since this is his first infraction — and because he's the protagonist and the head disciple is into him, which surely helps in this context.

Why did I say that out loud, Shen Yuan cries to himself in shame as he walks towards the main building, his face flushed as he slowly approaches the large, imposing door leading to the Qian Cao Peak Lord's office. *I should've walked away instead of snooping around for gossip!*

Turns out the inner disciple's threat was not in vain, and he had indeed placed a complaint against Shen Yuan for sharing private information. Shen Yuan thought he would, at most, get an earful from Mu Qingfang whenever the head disciple arrived from his mission — not that he would have his first meeting with his Shizun, all over something he swears he didn't mean to say!

Breathing in and out, Shen Yuan places his knuckles against the door. A voice echoes from inside the room before he can knock. "Disciple Shen may enter."

There's no time left for soothing exercises, so Shen Yuan opens the door carefully while trying to ignore his erratic heartbeat. His hands are shaking, pathetically so, which he tries to hide under the long sleeves of his winter robes; he hopes the Qian Cao Peak Lord won't notice it, or at least won't mind it.

Looking towards the floor, Shen Yuan closes the door and turns in the direction of the peak lord, lowering his head and joining his fists as instructed. “This disciple greets Shizun.”

A low hum echoes through the room, sending goosebumps through Shen Yuan’s skin as he desperately tries to keep his cool. This is the worst way for him to meet his Shizun for the first time — how is Shen Yuan supposed to give the peak lord a good impression if their first meeting is the one time Shen Yuan fucked up so bad he broke a very obvious rule?

He knew he would have to meet the Qian Cao Peak Lord someday, but the man was rarely ever in Qian Cao — it seems most peak lords are already preparing for their ascensions years in advance, spending months upon months in seclusion inside the Lingxi caves. It was only recently that his Shizun had returned from one of these seclusions, so recent that Shen Yuan had barely caught a glimpse of him before being thrown into this situation.

My only salvation is hugging Mu Qingfang’s thighs, Shen Yuan mentally cries.

In fact, Shen Yuan only found out his name yesterday! It’s not like PIDW ever mentioned the previous generation of peak lords that much, so Shen Yuan has only heard so much from other disciples; thankfully, a disgruntled hall monitor from the Qian Cao Peak Lord’s generation had been annoyed enough by the workload to curse the peak lord by name. Conveniently, Shen Yuan was just within earshot to hear it — Jiang Anhui is his Shizun’s name, and Shen Yuan assumes ‘An’ must be the generational name.

The disciple is brought out of his thoughts by a rhythmic knocking sound against wood. Briefly looking upwards, Shen Yuan notices the Qian Cao Peak Lord leisurely tapping as he looks towards Shen Yuan.

“Disciple Shen must have an idea of why he has been called,” the peak lord seated in front of him says, his stare weighing heavily on Shen Yuan’s lowered head. Shen Yuan gulps and nods quietly. “Disciple Gu from Qing Jing claims Disciple Shen has shared private information without his authorization for malicious purposes. Have you done so?”

When you put it that way, it sounds way worse than what happened! Shen Yuan hesitates before nodding once. “…This disciple has shared private information without prior consent.”

Jiang Anhui stays silent for a few seconds. Shen Yuan doesn’t dare look up, or else the peak lord would see how scared shitless he is.

“Disciple Shen admits to sharing private information, but not for malicious purposes?” his Shizun asks, a barely noticeable tone of amusement under the peak lord’s calm voice. Shen Yuan nods again. “It is only fair for this master to listen to Disciple Shen’s side as well, so you may speak.”

Shen Yuan breathes in, finally raising his head after staring so hard at the floor he might have drilled a hole in it. The first thing he sees is a fairly young-looking face staring right back at him, scrutinizing every move of his with quick eyes and a serene smile. Sometimes, Shen Yuan forgets that cultivators don’t age like the rest. Having a man that looks no older than 35 be responsible for a whole peak is difficult to get used to…

A second passes before Shen Yuan snaps back to reality. Lowering his eyes in embarrassment, the disciple breathes in and starts speaking.

“This one went to Qing Jing with the purpose of borrowing a few books for studying, and while looking for the building, happened to walk into an altercation between Disciple Gu and… another disciple,” Shen Yuan says, deciding not to mention Shen Qingqiu. “This disciple was not aware Disciple Gu was present, but happened to identify him after getting a better look at his face… Which caused this one to speak without noticing.”

The Qian Cao Peak Lord continues to stare, an uncomfortable silence permeating through the room as Shen Yuan holds his breath and hopes his explanation doesn’t sound too outlandish. He knows it sounds like a lie — and he wishes it was the case! Unfortunately, his mouth thinks faster than his mind and it finally caused some consequences for him.

“Disciple Shen’s version of events is indeed different from Disciple Gu’s,” Jiang Anhui remarks, his voice not denoting any doubt over Shen Yuan’s side — but not any support either. “Does Disciple Shen know which other disciple was present?”

Shen Yuan feels the blood rushing away from his face. Should he tell it’s Shen Qingqiu who was there? Shen Yuan really wants to avoid it, but how can he lie in front of his Shizun who is looking at him like he’s aware of every single thought going on inside his head?!

Nervously swallowing, Shen Yuan relents. “…Head Disciple Shen.”

A small laugh comes out of the peak lord’s mouth. Shen Yuan looks up in surprise, finding Jiang Anhui looking rather amused by the turn of events. Well, as amused as his perpetually calm face allowed him to show.

“Disciple Gu *conveniently* left out Head Disciple Shen’s presence,” the peak lord says, tapping his fingers against the wooden chair, his gaze shifting towards the table for a few seconds before he looks at Shen Yuan again. “Perhaps it is because of his presence that the topic of venereal diseases came up?”

A cough comes out of Shen Yuan’s mouth as he desperately tries to avoid choking on his own spit. His face is red with embarrassment, but how can he ignore it?! Not once did Shen Yuan expect a peak lord to be so direct with his words! Aren’t they supposed to speak in riddles and drawn-out metaphors?

After recomposing himself, Shen Yuan hesitantly answers the question as his face continues to burn with shame. “…Disciple Gu was discussing something similar with Head Disciple Shen, yes. This one happened to remember Disciple Gu’s visit when hearing the topic, as it was this disciple’s first time treating so many of these illnesses…”

Shen Yuan pales as he notices he kept rambling. Jiang Anhui does not comment on it and is silent for a few seconds before asking his next question. “Why did disciple Shen speak up?”

Shen Yuan knows the easy answer — it was an accident, I didn’t mean it. Still, it isn’t every day he accidentally says something out loud, much less something he knows cannot be

spoken lightly. It isn't his first time experiencing fights between people, so why did he speak up because of something happening to Shen Qingqiu of all people?

The answer comes out quieter than Shen Yuan wanted. "This one felt it was unfair of Disciple Gu to talk down to others about something he is also guilty of."

Not daring to look up, Shen Yuan waits until the peak lord gives him his punishment and gets this done with. How can he explain something he barely understands himself? Shen Yuan has no clue why he defended Shen Qingqiu, and even worse — he knows it was the right thing to do.

Yes, Shen Yuan absolutely hates the Qing Jing Head Disciple, and he's a shitty Shizun who abused children due to his miserable personality, but still… It's infuriating to see someone shamelessly judging others for things they themselves do, talking down as if they are the epitome of morality and greatness. For all that Shen Yuan loathes about Shen Qingqiu, at least the head disciple knows he's a horrible person.

"It is a righteous mindset," Jiang Anhui remarks, which makes Shen Yuan look up in surprise. Before any hopes about avoiding punishment can spread in the disciple's mind, the peak lord continues to speak. "…However, disciple Shen has broken a crucial rule of Qian Cao, no matter how his heart was in the right place."

Shen Yuan's expression wilts upon hearing the words. He should have expected so; of course the peak lord will punish him for a very obvious infraction that he admitted to.

"Disciple Shen Yuan shall write down the rules of Qian Cao a hundred times, without a single mistake or smudge, to be delivered in a week," the peak lord declares, and Shen Yuan nods lethargically as if hearing his death sentence. "Disciple Shen is dismissed."

Bowing once again towards the Qian Cao Peak Lord, Shen Yuan makes his way out of the peak lord's office in quick steps, closing the door behind him as he leaves with a quiet sigh.

Honestly, things could have gone worse. Most peaks still use corporal punishment for offenses, and considering Shen Yuan did break the rules, something like kneeling for hours would be on the table. Is this the protagonist's privilege, or is Jiang Anhui nicer than the other peak lords?

Whichever the option, Shen Yuan cannot deny the stress he felt was enough to make him feel lightheaded. The adrenaline in his body has already quieted down now that he left the Qian Cao Peak Lord's office, wearing down his muscles as if he had run ten laps across the peak — but hey, at least his hands aren't shaking anymore!

Shen Yuan walks back to the dorms with heavy limbs and tired steps, sleeping his afternoon break away as soon as he reaches his room.

After three days pass without any incident or sudden meeting, Shen Yuan knows something is bound to happen.

At this point, he only hopes it won't be something as annoying as meeting Shen Qingqiu again or being punished to write 100 more papers filled with Qian Cao's rules. His poor hand is cramping enough from holding the brush with intense pressure in fear of messing up any stroke, and that's not even adding the load of work he must do when he's on a shift!

Thankfully, the incident hadn't spread much, at least in Qian Cao. Contrary to Shen Yuan's initial thoughts, it seems like Jiang Anhui is not nicer than other peak lords — he just chooses different methods for punishment, since it does seem a little counterintuitive to inflict corporal punishment in a peak dedicated to healing.

It goes against their whole 'do no harm' motto, so the Qian Cao Peak Lord often sends disciples to write down the rules and run around the peaks if they've been particularly annoying. Shen Yuan was baffled to find that he wasn't alone in the writing room of the punishment hall of Qian Cao; there were at least seventeen other disciples there, all writing down the rules with an expression of pure misery as they put away their filled papers.

It did not take long for Shen Yuan to thoroughly empathize with the other disciples. Eight copies after beginning and his hand already felt as if it was about to fall off from nonstop writing with an inconvenient brush. Three days in and Shen Yuan has roughly half of his required copies; only because he remembered his older brother's office stretch tricks, which gave his wrists enough strength to not deteriorate from the strain.

Of course, the other disciples shot weird looks at Shen Yuan when he dropped his brush and started doing seemingly random hand movements. One of his shixiongs, Zhang Hui, stopped him at the hall's exit to ask what Shen Yuan was doing, to which he explained and gave a demonstration of how to do it; the next day, Shen Yuan's hand stretching techniques had spread to the rest of the disciples in the punishment hall, and Shen Yuan had gained a good amount of reputation points for his modern wisdom.

One of the only good things that came from this punishment, alongside the fact Shen Yuan got another dexterity skill point from all the writing he had to do. Will he be able to finally get those 5 dexterity points by the end of this punishment? Shen Yuan hopes so, because he's trying very hard to be as time-efficient as possible!

There's still a month or so before the inner disciple task deadline, but Shen Yuan would like to be done with it as fast as possible.

Yawning as he stretches his hands, Shen Yuan carefully puts away the copies he finished during today's writing session — he can come whenever he has free time, so Shen Yuan is cramming all he can during his free morning and afternoon shifts in addition to always coming to write during the night. He hasn't been assigned to a nightly shift ever since the Ji Jue situation went down, so Shen Yuan found himself with an oddly free schedule when it comes to the later hours.

Bowing once towards the hall monitor, Shen Yuan immediately starts making his way towards the dormitories. He has finished his daily writing session earlier than expected, since he woke up earlier and already filled his daily quota of copies; there's still about two hours before lunch time, and two more hours before Shen Yuan has any classes. Perhaps he should study some herbology…

As Shen Yuan wonders what to do in his free time, a disciple runs into him, making both stumble backwards. Thankfully, Shen Yuan didn't fall, but his shijie did not have the same luck as he did.

Shen Yuan offers his hand to Fu Qiao, another outer disciple that often shares classes with him. Once his shijie looks up, her eyes shine with relief and Shen Yuan's mental sirens start to go off.

Here comes my weekly romancing task, I guess…

"Shen-shidi!" Fu Qiao exclaims as she takes his hand and stands, looking as if she met her savior. Shen Yuan sighs to himself, knowing exactly what is to come. "It must be fate for this shijie to meet you now!"

Yeah, sure, your NPC task-giving fate, Shen Yuan remarks in his head. Feigning curiosity, he tilts his head. "Did something happen, shijie?"

Fu Qiao starts making a pitiful expression. "This shijie has been selected to help Wang-shixiong with the first-aid classes in Bai Zhan today, but this one has to deliver an essay for teacher Wu's class and I haven't finished it yet…"

Now feeling genuinely curious, Shen Yuan furrows his brows as he listens to the disciple. "What exactly is this first-aid class in Bai Zhan? This shidi did not know Qian Cao offers classes to other peaks."

"It's a new implementation every peak in Cang Qiong is testing out," Fu Qiao excitedly replies, looking up to the other with doe eyes. "If Shen-shidi is interested, why not take this shijie's place in today's class? It'll be very easy, just follow what Wang-shixiong tells you! I'll even pay shidi half a string of cash if he takes my place!"

【New Quest! Take Fu Qiao's place at the Bai Zhan first-aid class. Reward: 100 R-Points, 30 Reputation Points, 500 copper coins. Does User wish to accept the quest?】

Isn't that a lot of money?! Shen Yuan ponders to himself, quickly remembering that most of his fellow disciples are fairly well-off. There's no question about it; even if Shen Yuan is faced with mortal peril at this supposedly innocent first-aid class, he absolutely must go! He barely has 30 coins to his name, and considering winter is arriving soon and Shen Yuan only has worn-out clothes, he should get some money to buy new ones…

It won't be enough with just this task, but it surely will be a good boost to his empty wallet. Besides, 100 R-Points is just too good to pass on — Shen Yuan is still salty that he spent what could have been his 2x Skill Boost on something that wasn't even worth it. With these 100 R-Points, Shen Yuan will have enough to buy one and still have some points left!

Besides, Shen Yuan hasn't seen Liu Qingge since his visit to Qian Cao, and the future Bai Zhan Peak Lord was one of his favorite pre-Abyss characters; interacting a bit more with him may bring a flood of embarrassing cliché tropes upon Shen Yuan, but it might be worth it if it means learning more about his character.

“This shidi will take Fu-shijie’s place, then,” Shen Yuan replies, watching the other disciple breathe out a sigh of relief.

“You’re heaven-sent, Shen-shidi,” Fu Qiao praises with an exacerbated expression. “Meet Wang-shixiong at Bai Zhan’s entrance in an incense’s time. Tell shixiong I’ve got a cold or something, or else he’s gonna pester me about this for the rest of the week. Anyways, I’ll pay you when you return!”

With that, Fu Qiao turns away and leaves in a hurry, probably running to the dormitories so she can finish her essay in time. Shen Yuan sighs and checks his clothes for any ink stains, since he’ll have to leave sooner than expected, which sort of throws his (non-existent) schedule off-balance. *Think of the money, think of the R-Points!*

Thankfully, Shen Yuan is in good shape to appear in front of others, so he starts making his way to Bai Zhan immediately. It won’t hurt to arrive early, surely; maybe he will get more interactions with Liu Qingge!

He cannot deny he’s a little nervous, of course; Shen Yuan’s first impression of Bai Zhan as a whole was Ji Jue trying to kill him and then never sending the tiniest of apologies for it. Besides, he has absolutely no clue how he will react upon seeing the Bai Zhan disciple again — will Shen Yuan be anxious, afraid, will he feel that same sharp pain between his ribs?

Whatever happens, Shen Yuan will have to find a way to deal with it. It hasn’t happened, so he doesn’t have to feel that intensely towards the Bai Zhan disciple; Shen Yuan simply witnessed a wilder-than-usual qi deviation and left unscathed.

Shaking his head away from these thoughts, Shen Yuan continues to walk down the rainbow bridge.

It doesn’t take long before Shen Yuan starts seeing the outline of Bai Zhan Peak from the distance; with each step closer, the clanging of swords becomes more noticeable. It is unlike Qian Cao’s energetic yet quiet background noises, mostly consisting of hurried steps, hushed conversation and the occasional grunt coming from a patient.

The smell is very different, too. Shen Yuan is used to the smell of blood and disease, to the point he’s completely shut it down from his mind and the only thing he can smell strongly inside the healing peak is the various herbs used there; in Bai Zhan, the same smell of blood is here, although not as prominent and mostly mixed with sweat.

Shen Yuan hates to admit it, but Qing Jing is the best smelling peak in Cang Qiong so far. Qiong Ding is a close second, though!

Once Shen Yuan reaches Bai Zhan’s entrance, he notices Wang Haoran isn’t here yet. Not knowing when his shixiong will arrive and where they need to go, Shen Yuan stands on the edge of the entrance gate, between the intersection of the main path and a smaller one, hiding his face as much as he can to avoid the nasty stares coming his way. Does Bai Zhan as a collective hate Shen Qingqiu this much?!

Maybe I should’ve demanded another veil from the System…

The only activity left for Shen Yuan is to look at the scenery and look down whenever he accidentally looks into someone's eye. Oh, how he misses his phone… At least Bai Zhan is prettier than expected — honestly, Shen Yuan was expecting a barren, sandy landscape filled with training dummies and military tents. Surprisingly, they have tons of trees here too!

Bai Zhan seems to have more empty spaces in the middle of the forest than Qian Cao, but that's probably for sparring matches. Overall, Shen Yuan's review of the peak's landscape is a solid 7/10, unfortunately not beating Qing Jing or Qian Cao. Maybe if they add a few flowers and scenic spots, Bai Zhan could be one of the top three prettiest peaks!

It doesn't take long for Shen Yuan's scenic review to be cut short by an unexpected event — and honestly, he should have expected it —, as a tall and large disciple bumps against him and basically sends Shen Yuan flying towards the secondary path next to him.

Desperately reaching for whatever he can see within his blurry camp of view before he falls onto the ground, Shen Yuan grasps a piece of cloth with his hands, hoping to secure it hard enough to balance himself. Instead, the oddly heavy piece of cloth falls alongside him, and Shen Yuan closes his eyes as he prepares for impact with the dirty ground.

A sigh of relief comes out of Shen Yuan's mouth as he feels both of his hands against the dirt, supporting his body barely above the ground instead of dirtying his robes. He already managed to keep it clean from the sticky black ink, so it won't be this muddy dirt that will undo his hard work!

Shen Yuan's self-congratulating feelings quickly go away as he feels an odd warmth coming from under his body. Shen Yuan's heart freezes and his eyes shoot open.

"Hey, watch where you're going-" the Bai Zhan disciple that bumped against Shen Yuan starts complaining, his voice withering and his face paling as he looks down at the scene unfolding in front of him. "I'm so sorry, Liu-shixiong, I hadn't seen shixiong coming…!"

I'm the one who deserves an apology! Shen Yuan wants to say, but his body refuses to move as he stares in shock at the Bai Zhan Head Disciple looking back at him. The first thing Shen Yuan can think about is how insanely pretty Liu Qingge is — perfectly sculpted nose, small and plump lips that look softer than they should for a warrior, and a beauty mark under his eye that seems to be placed like the final touch on a skillfully painted portrait.

Liu Qingge looks equally as shocked by the accident, mouth slightly agape as his face starts growing warmer as he stares back into Shen Yuan's eyes like a bewildered maiden.

【 Liu Qingge is surprised by User's closeness. +15 Affection Points added to 'Bai Zhan's Head Disciple, Liu Qingge'. 】

The System's sudden chime is enough to bring Shen Yuan out of his trance. Feeling his own face warming up, Shen Yuan backs away from the Bai Zhan Head Disciple as if touching fire, falling back into the floor with an ugly thud and dirtying his robes.

"Liu-shixiong," Shen Yuan nervously says, ignoring the pain in his lower back and tailbone as he tries to bury the embarrassment deep inside his heart. "I- This one is so sorry…! Is

shixiong fine?”

The Bai Zhan Head Disciple blinks for a few seconds before answering, his face still blushed. “…Yes. This one is fine.”

Liu Qingge then rises from the ground without much effort, leaving Shen Yuan looking up at the head disciple for a brief moment before he himself scrambles to get off the floor. Liu Qingge reaches out his hand, looking away from Shen Yuan who accepts the head disciple’s help and tries his hardest to ignore the fact that the both of them are so red they look like tomatoes.

One brief look around the area is enough to tell that the disciple who pushed Shen Yuan is long gone, probably fearing whatever they do in Bai Zhan whenever someone’s feeling wronged. This, however, does not change the fact that everyone else in the vicinity is looking at Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge as if seeing a rare beast in front of them.

Oh, this will make it to Cang Qiong’s top ten gossips of the week, won’t it?

It doesn’t take long for the whispers to start, this time feeling more hostile than usual. Shen Yuan gulps, feeling somewhat uncomfortable under the scrutiny of so many Bai Zhan disciples that seem to regard him horribly without knowing him. Shen Yuan has been a disciple of Cang Qiong Sect for a few months; someone should have realized he’s not related to Shen Qingqiu by this point, surely!

To alleviate his shame and discomfort, Shen Yuan focuses on dusting off his robes and ignoring the glares.

Surprisingly, Liu Qingge seems to pick up on the discomfort coming from the other. One sharp side glance at the crowd is all it takes for the Bai Zhan disciples to disperse like wild animals fleeing to safety, leaving only the head disciple and Shen Yuan at the (usually crowded) entrance.

“Is Shen-shidi here for the upcoming class?” Liu Qingge asks, breaking the awkward silence between them.

“Yes,” Shen Yuan replies as he manages to dust off most of the dirt from his shirt, hoping the redness in his cheeks is long gone. “Will Liu-shixiong participate?”

Shen Yuan isn’t surprised when Liu Qingge nods. Of course he’s participating, this is an otome game! In an attempt to farm some affection points, Shen Yuan smiles warmly at the Bai Zhan Head Disciple. “Then, this one looks forward to assisting shixiong!”

【 Liu Qingge thinks User is adorable. +5 Affection Points added to ‘Bai Zhan’s Head Disciple, Liu Qingge’. 】

The Bai Zhan Head Disciple’s face immediately warms up with the statement, and Liu Qingge quickly averts his eyes from Shen Yuan. *Aw, that’s kinda cute.*

Before Liu Qingge can come up with an answer, Shen Yuan spots a familiar green blur running towards Bai Zhan's entrance. Wang Haoran's expression turns into confusion as he sees Shen Yuan instead of Fu Qiao, and his brows frown deeply at the presence of Liu Qingge.

Thankfully, his shixiong doesn't take long to snap out of his surprise and he quickly bows his head towards the Bai Zhan Head Disciple. "Greeting Liu-shixiong. I fear this one will have to take Shen-shidi now so we can prepare for the class."

Shen Yuan cannot avoid the disappointment in his face at the thought of not having more time to farm, but from Wang Haoran's slight panting and his hurried voice, it seems like they are short on time.

Liu Qingge stares at the other disciple and nods, quickly looking back at Shen Yuan with a microscopic smile on his face. "Until later, shidi."

Smiling back as warmth spreads through his face once again, Shen Yuan ignores Wang Haoran's inquisitive look and starts to follow the older disciple. It doesn't take long for the silhouette of Liu Qingge to completely disappear as both disciples make their way to the central part of Bai Zhan, which makes Shen Yuan feel oddly saddened.

Surprisingly, Liu Qingge is the easiest to deal with between the male leads, and maybe that's why Shen Yuan feels this way. Mu Qingfang is also somewhat easy to deal with, but that's only if he isn't worried about Shen Yuan having a hard time — it can get a little overwhelming when the Qian Cao Head Disciple keeps looking at him like he's a child that needs to be coaxed to tell a secret.

What's so wrong about Shen Yuan keeping his feelings to himself? It's what people prefer, even when they ask you what's wrong. He and Mu Qingfang aren't even that close, after all.

"This shixiong was not expecting to meet Shen-shidi here. Did something happen to Fu-shimei?" Wang Haoran asks in a concerned tone.

Keeping up with the script crafted by his shijie, Shen Yuan nods. "Fu-shijie caught a cold and asked if this shidi could come in her place."

Wang Haoran nods, and both disciples continue walking quietly through the busy peak of Bai Zhan. Now that Shen Yuan is accompanying his shixiong, less disciples stare at him, mostly disregarding their presence and giving way for them to pass without much trouble. How can Shen Qingqiu cause so much trouble that the mere thought of someone being connected to him is enough for Bai Zhan to immediately ostracize them?

Of course, Shen Yuan doesn't have solid confirmation that the hostility is caused by Shen Qingqiu, but if he managed to send a qi deviating disciple into murder mode just at the thought of seeing him, then it surely is a possibility!

"This shixiong did not know Shen-shidi and Liu-shixiong were acquainted," Wang Haoran casually comments as they walk towards the central courtyard of Bai Zhan's learning halls,

shaking Shen Yuan out of his thoughts. “Come to think of it, shidi knows so many head disciples…”

Shen Yuan lets out a nervous laugh. *Can’t really say it’s because I’m supposed to pick one of them to date,* he remarks mentally. So, Shen Yuan settles for a more neutral answer. “Now that Wang-shixiong mentions it, it seems that is the case…”

Wang Haoran stares at Shen Yuan’s eyes briefly before his smile turns into a humorous one. “It seems that Mu-shixiong is not the only head disciple enchanted by shidi’s cuteness.”

Once again, Shen Yuan knows his cheeks are burning. *What cuteness?!* Slapping the older disciple’s shoulder lightly in an unserious manner, he turns his head away from Wang Haoran. Shen Yuan knew that other people would eventually start gossiping about his closeness to so many influential people in the sect, but hearing it has turned out to be a challenge for his thin face!

“It’s not like that,” Shen Yuan embarrassedly says, opening the courtyard’s door and hoping Wang Haoran lets go of this subject soon.

An amused laugh comes out of the older disciple. “If shidi says so.”

Shen Yuan ignores him, strolling inside of the courtyard as he prepares for the upcoming class with a strange, warm anticipation brewing in his heart.

Chapter 9: do forget about proper ancient skinship

Chapter Notes

> hello!! how are u guys doing?? this chapter took a while to write, but in compensation, i give you all 7k words ;) hope u guys enjoy it!!
> bsky: shiyooji.bsky.social

Shen Yuan ignores the fluttering sensation in his stomach as Bai Zhan disciples start entering entering the courtyard.

He must be anxious because it's his first time teaching a class, or maybe because he doesn't like big crowds — much less big crowds comprised of sweaty meatheads. Shen Yuan's eyes keep looking at the entrance with expectation, only for it to grow into disappointment as he doesn't spot any head disciple entering.

It isn't like Shen Yuan is *waiting* for Liu Qingge, of course he isn't! It's just that, if anything were to go awry in this class, having the future War God in the vicinity would be helpful.

Wang Haoran seems awfully cheeky today, to Shen Yuan's demise. As most disciples sit on the pre-arranged seats spread through the courtyard, the older disciple approaches Shen Yuan with a smile. "We're ready to start. Does shidi want to wait for Head Disciple Liu?"

"Why are you asking me this," Shen Yuan awkwardly replies, hoping his face isn't turning red as they speak. "If shixiong wants to start, then we will start…"

As Shen Yuan attempts to distance the subject from the Bai Zhan Head Disciple, the courtyard's door opens once again, revealing said head disciple entering in a hurry. Liu Qingge's eyes sweep through the vast place, only to stop once he spots Shen Yuan.

A quiet head nod from the head disciple is enough to make Wang Haoran poke Shen Yuan's arm with his elbow — not without a cheeky smile spread through his shixiong's face, of course. "This shixiong thinks we can start now!"

Shen Yuan ignores his desire to slap the top of Wang Haoran's head and goes to his pre-arranged spot, waiting beside a crate full of medical supplies to hand them as the older disciple asks. Since Shen Yuan is nothing more than an assistant in this class, it will be Wang Haoran who will do all the explaining — for once, being an outer disciple is worth it.

Surprisingly, the Bai Zhan disciples are mostly seated in their assigned spots and immediately notice Wang Haoran preparing to start the class; their chatter quiets down as they wait. Shen Yuan can't help but be impressed — he genuinely thought teaching Bai Zhan disciples would be the equivalent of teaching a modern class of kindergarteners.

Are they quiet because their head disciple is present? From what Shen Yuan has heard of Bai Zhan, they have immense respect for whoever's the strongest around — which is, without a doubt, Liu Qingge.

Wang Haoran checks his notes quickly before looking around the courtyard and speaking up. "As it seems that most have arrived, this one shall start the class-"

A noise interrupts his shixiong, once again coming from the entrance door that opens and closes quickly as another disciple enters the courtyard. Shen Yuan looks up, feeling himself freeze as he meets the same eyes that once stood upon his dying body.

Ji Jue bows his head slightly towards Wang Haoran and Liu Qingge, quietly making his way to his assigned seat. Not once does he look towards Shen Yuan's trembling figure, nor does he seem aware of his presence — for all Shen Yuan knows, Ji Jue might not remember what happened either; not all people remember their qi deviations, much less severe ones.

Trying to keep himself composed, Shen Yuan breathes in quietly, grasping his hands together in hopes they stop shaking; at least they are covered by his long sleeves, since he's not wearing his shift uniform that has shorter ones. It isn't like Shen Yuan has to interact with Ji Jue, he just has to hand stuff to Wang Haoran and wait by his side, so why does he feel so afraid…?

Wang Haoran takes a quick glance at Shen Yuan, looking at him with a worried expression for a few seconds until the younger disciple nods in an attempt to reassure him. Shen Yuan has accepted the task, and he isn't about to quit on Wang Haoran right when they're about to start — he will find a way to calm himself down for his shixiong and the enticing reward of 500 coins, if not for himself.

The older disciple gives Shen Yuan a tiny reassuring smile and turns back to look at the Bai Zhan disciples, finally starting the lecture.

It is a basic lecture on first aid, which makes sense for Bai Zhan to be taught. Although he knows it all by heart — not only because he recently had to take these same classes, but also because of his familiarity with healthcare environments —, Shen Yuan tries to pay attention to the lecture, mostly so he has something to focus on instead of letting his nerves get the best of him.

The first minutes are used to explain how to access a situation properly, which seems to bore some of the Bai Zhan disciples. Some sigh, others yawn, but most listen as intended. Wang Haoran isn't a bad teacher, honestly — he doesn't bother using complicated words that would not be known to people outside of healthcare, instead opting for direct wording to guide the Bai Zhan disciples on what to do.

Shen Yuan pays attention for half of the lecture, spacing out during the other half; at least Wang Haoran indicates with when to hand him stuff with a slight poke, which is enough to make Shen Yuan react and do his job. Besides looking towards the box filled with medical supplies, Shen Yuan keeps his eyes fixed on the ground, not daring to look up in fear of meeting Ji Jue's gaze once again.

“If any object is lodged inside an injury, do *not* remove it,” Wang Haoran says, discreetly poking Shen Yuan and indicating he should raise his arm, which he does. “Even arrows cannot be pulled out, as they may be what is stopping any major bleeding. In this case, one should apply pressure on either side of the object and find a piece of fabric to build padding before bandaging.”

As he speaks, Wang Haoran imitates the motions using Shen Yuan’s arm, treating a pretend injury so the Bai Zhan disciples can understand it more clearly. With a few quiet hums of understanding echoing through the courtyard, the older disciple lets go of Shen Yuan’s arm.

“Each one of you will form pairs and be given two pieces of bandage, which will be wrapped around each other’s forearm as previously instructed,” Wang Haoran announces, signaling for Shen Yuan to come and grab the boxes filled with medical supplies. “Any doubts will be answered by these two shidis, just raise your hand to call us over.”

As they gather the necessary materials, Wang Haoran whispers on the Shen Yuan’s ear. “Shidi doesn’t need to worry about Ji-shixiong, I’ll distribute the supplies where he is.”

Shen Yuan raises his head in surprise, waking up from the daze and looking at his shixiong as gratitude spreads through his heart. “Thanking shixiong for the kindness…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Wang Haoran replies, smiling lightly at the other. “Now go and give your admirer some bandages before he drills a hole onto us with that stare.”

Before Shen Yuan has a chance to hide the redness in his face and come up with a decent reply to Wang Haoran, the older disciple nudges the other’s back towards the seated disciples. Shen Yuan curses his shixiong in his head and breathes out before putting a neutral smile on his face as he starts making his way through the paired disciples, handing out two pairs of bandages as instructed.

Taking a peek at his side of the courtyard, Shen Yuan is relieved to find out Ji Jue isn’t anywhere near the place he is assigned to; in fact, he’s on the opposite side, which gives Shen Yuan the time necessary to calm himself about the disciple’s presence.

Shen Yuan wants to say he doesn’t know why he is so affected, but it is hard for him to deny it — the experience has affected him, and saying it hasn’t happened because it theoretically did not (in this timeline, at least) did nothing to alleviate his anxiety. Just *knowing* he’s near that man is enough to make Shen Yuan’s body tense up, even when he cannot see him; and to know that Ji Jue doesn’t remember what he did makes Shen Yuan feel bitter.

Breathing out in an attempt to calm himself, Shen Yuan continues to quietly hand out the bandages, until he eventually reaches the ‘admirer’ Wang Haoran couldn’t stop bothering Shen Yuan about. Looking up towards Liu Qingge’s annoyingly pretty face, Shen Yuan’s face contorts into a frown as he notices the head disciple is seating alone.

Shen Yuan doesn’t need to look around to know what’s going on. *Of course the number of disciples is uneven and Liu Qingge is the only one without a pair, this is a cheap, pay-to-win cliché otome game!*

Shen Yuan hides his frustration towards the dog-blood cliché and looks inquisitively at the head disciple. “Liu-shixiong does not have a pair?”

The Bai Zhan Head Disciple nods with a flush of embarrassment in his face, hesitating for a few seconds before speaking. “…It seems like there is no one left. If it does not bother shidi, may this shixiong…”

“Yes, he can!” Wang Haoran cheerfully answers, suddenly popping up behind Shen Yuan and giving him the scare of the century. “That’s what our Shen-shidi is here for, right? To assist with the class!”

The urge to hit Wang Haoran with the box of bandages in his hand is very high, but Shen Yuan holds back. “…Indeed it is.”

Placing the mostly empty box on the ground, Shen Yuan gives Wang Haoran one last glance before the older disciple cheerfully walks back to his previous spot, going back to his task of helping others with questions. Shen Yuan mentally breathes in as he sits on top of his knees, grabs a piece of bandage and hands it to the Bai Zhan Head Disciple.

At least Shen Yuan isn’t the only one mildly embarrassed by the situation, as Liu Qingge seems to struggle with making eye contact as badly as Shen Yuan does. *...I’d never imagine he’d be the shy type,* Shen Yuan thinks to himself as he rolls up his long sleeves up to his elbows, unknowing of the head disciple’s growing redness as he looks towards the other’s bare forearm.

Meeting Liu Qingge’s timid gaze, Shen Yuan tilts his head in confusion at the head disciple’s flushing face when looking at his arm. Realizing it is unusual for others to show skin like this, Shen Yuan speaks up. “This shidi’s robes are too thick and would interfere with the task.”

Nodding, albeit with his face still bright red, Liu Qingge doesn’t reply and instead starts handling the piece of bandage, avoiding Shen Yuan’s eyes and arm like the plague. Shen Yuan doesn’t really understand *why* Liu Qingge is so shocked by the sight of anything more than a bare pair of hands — they are, after all, in PIDW!

By this point, Liu Qingge must have fought demons dressed much more scantily than Shen Yuan, so why is he so nervous? It is true that people in Cang Qiong don’t show much skin, usually covering their hands with long gloves as well, but it’s not like you can always be modest during a medical emergency! What’s a little skin showing when someone’s got an arrow stuck in their arm?

Shen Yuan is here so Liu Qingge can learn how to do basic emergency care, not to admonish him for looking at his arm!

After a few seconds that feel like years, Shen Yuan finally feels a warm touch against his forearm, so brief he can barely process it before it goes away, substituted by a cold fabric wrapping around his arm.

【 Liu Qingge thinks User's skin is soft. +15 Affection Points added to 'Bai Zhan's Head Disciple, Liu Qingge'. 】

...The beauty stat is worth something, Shen Yuan remarks to himself, remembering how his skin used to get awfully dry and irritated depending on the medication he was taking. The only good thing of being stuck in this game is being able to experience a normal, functioning body for once.

As the bandage wraps around his arm again and again, Shen Yuan tries to ignore his ever-growing heartbeat due to his closeness to Liu Qingge. It's not that Shen Yuan is gay or anything, it's just that anyone would be nervous with such a pretty, majestic looking man sitting so close!

Liu Qingge retreats his hands after finishing, so quickly it looks like someone avoiding a scalding pan straight out of the stove. Ignoring the odd reaction and taking a peek at his newly bandaged arm, Shen Yuan is baffled to find out it has been perfectly wrapped, with just the right amount of pressure around the 'wound'. Not even he, with all his time and experience being in hospitals, had been able to do it correctly on the first try.

Looking at the Bai Zhan Head Disciple, Shen Yuan doesn't hide the praise in his words. "This shidi doesn't know a single person who has done this so correctly in their first time. Liu-shixiong should consider transferring to Qian Cao."

Shen Yuan says the latter jokingly, and Liu Qingge lets out a little wheeze — barely audible, yes, but a wheeze nonetheless! Before Shen Yuan can be shocked at the Bai Zhan Head Disciple's first laugh in front of him, the System chimes in and a screen pops up on top of Liu Qingge's head.

【 Liu Qingge is happy to receive praise from User. +10 Affection Points added to 'Bai Zhan's Head Disciple, Liu Qingge. 】

"This shixiong will consider the offer," Liu Qingge replies, joking back at Shen Yuan.

Letting out a little laugh, Shen Yuan finds that he very much enjoys spending time with Liu Qingge. Contrary to their first meeting, the Bai Zhan Head Disciple is a nice person, albeit quiet — which is honestly a bonus for Shen Yuan, as the pressure to constantly find something to talk about is not present.

The comforting silence is enough to make Shen Yuan forget about Ji Jue's presence for a while.

The other Bai Zhan disciples are aware of their odd proximity, but none dare to look their way for longer than a second; is Liu Qingge that scary to them? To Shen Yuan, he might look a little stoic from time to time and also very quiet, but what's so wrong with a quiet, introspective beauty?

As Shen Yuan looks around the courtyard, Wang Haoran gives him a signal. Sighing, Shen Yuan starts unwrapping the bandage in his arm before giving Liu Qingge a small smile and

raising from the ground to help the older disciple. “This shidi will have to leave. It was nice meeting Liu-shixiong again.”

Liu Qingge nods calmly. “En. It was nice meeting shidi as well.”

Shen Yuan smiles once again before turning away and leaving in a better mood than he had arrived. Even if he didn’t interact much with the Bai Zhan Head Disciple today, it surely earned him more than enough points — 25 points, which is almost enough to put Liu Qingge on par with Mu Qingfang and Yue Qingyuan!

Shen Yuan starts retrieving the bandages from other disciples, who all avert their gaze away from him with flushed faces. If five minutes interacting with Liu Qingge is enough to make Bai Zhan disciples stop treating him with hostility, then maybe Shen Yuan should seek the head disciple more often…

At least today’s struggle has ended. Shen Yuan assumes the classes are kept shorter than usual, since they are complementary and there’s less content to teach per class. The Bai Zhan disciples all start to slowly leave the courtyard, some clearly bored with the class and others looking more studious than expected.

Wang Haoran lets out a giggle as Shen Yuan approaches to put away the used bandages. *“Aiya,* Mu-shixiong has serious competition!”

His shixiong’s statement almost makes Shen Yuan drop the box in his hands, barely avoiding the disciples walking near them towards the exit. Adjusting it in his arms, the younger disciple feels like his face is too thin for this — is it because he’s the protagonist of this otome game that he cannot hide any emotions anymore?! Shen Yuan used to be pretty good at it!

“Wang-shixiong!” Shen Yuan whispers frantically, looking around to find that the disciples closest to their position have turned their heads away in embarrassment. “It’s not like that-!”

“Whatever shidi says,” Wang Haoran dismissively replies as he grabs the remaining supplies. “Anyways, we must return soon. Senior Yang will have my head if I arrive late to the laboratory again…”

Shen Yuan ignores the older disciple, too embarrassed to bother to reply and hoping to recuperate some of his dignity by not responding to Wang Haoran’s teasing.

Shen Yuan finishes his punishment successfully upon returning to Qian Cao, and thanks to his deal with Fu Qiao, he’s also half a tael of silver richer.

A week has passed since his visit to Bai Zhan, a strangely unremarkable week. Mu Qingfang is still doing god knows what, their Shizun has gone into seclusion, all of his seniors are focusing on the upcoming festivals — and Shen Yuan is stuck studying nonstop so he can raise his dexterity skill to 5.

He hasn't spent his 180 points on a skill boost — no, Shen Yuan is keeping some points in case it takes too long to raise his special skill to 100%. He's a responsible adult with a backup plan! If that one skill boost isn't enough, then *maybe* Shen Yuan will ignore his thin face and go out hunting for R-Points…

Shen Yuan sighs as he puts away the mortar, deciding his wrists have had enough medicine grinding for today. He's not on shift now, but he is trying to raise his dexterity skill, so why not gain some reputation points and coins from his shixiongs and shijies needing their menial tasks done while he's at it?

He only needs 2 reputation points to reach level 3, which should unlock better rewards. Shen Yuan doesn't have much money, but it's enough to make sure he will enjoy the upcoming New Year celebrations without relying on anyone else to pay for his snacks — ah, how Shen Yuan misses credit cards and the blissful ignorance of a second gen Young Master…

For now, he's stuck being the nicest, most reliable shidi in Qian Cao; actually, Shen Yuan thinks he will forever be stuck in this role, at least during his time inside this game. It's easier to gather both rewards and information if everyone likes you, at the end of the day.

The door to the workshop swings open, bringing Shen Yuan's attention to the disheveled-looking disciple that hurries into the room. Zhang Hui carries two closed crates in his hands, clearly weighing more than the disciple can carry from the sweat in his forehead.

Zhang Hui looks up, meeting Shen Yuan's confused gaze. His eyes then lit up in relief, and Shen Yuan figures out where this is going.

"Shen-shidi…!" Zhang Hui tiredly exclaims, dropping the crates on the floor and letting out a whine of pain.

Raising his lips in his signature polite smile, Shen Yuan tilts his head and furrows his brows slightly. "Zhang-shixiong, is there something wrong?"

"Yes! Chen-shijie is evil," Zhang Hui dramatically replies, his expression pitiful yet brimming with hope at the possibility of Shen Yuan doing his duties for him. "She told me to carry all the supply crates to the workshop, *and* told me I have to give Shang-shixiong the inventory report!"

"Shang-shixiong as in…?" Shen Yuan asks, dreading the upcoming answer.

"As in the An Ding top-dog!" Zhang Hui says, not bothering to lower his tone of voice as he refers to Shang Qinghua in such an… Informal way. "Please, Shen-shidi, you must help me! This shixiong is already feeling the bones in his back creaking, how can I withstand also taking stuff to Shang-shixiong?"

Shen Yuan wants to immediately say no and let Zhang Hui suffer, but the System decides to chime in before he opens his mouth.

【 New Quest! Deliver the monthly inventory report to Shang Qinghua. Reward: 100 R-Points, 20 reputation points. Does User wish to accept the quest? 】

The upcoming refusal lingers on Shen Yuan's tongue. 100 R-Points is a good deal, even if he has to deal with Shang Qinghua. Besides, 20 reputation points is enough to send Shen Yuan straight to the 3rd level of the reputation system, so it would be like killing two birds with one stone — and also getting shot on the foot, since it's Shang Qinghua who he's dealing with.

The pros outweigh the cons, to Shen Yuan's annoyance. Perhaps it would do him well to treat it as a sight viewing trip, as this will be his first time going to An Ding; will it look like a practical, minimally decorated peak as Bai Zhan, or will it look like a complex arrangement of buildings resembling a palace structure, like Qiong Ding does?

Ignoring the gigantic elephant in the room that is his impending meeting with Shang Qinghua, Shen Yuan nods after a few seconds of hesitation. "Yes, I can take the documents to An Ding."

【 Quest accepted! Wishing User good luck! 】

Zhang Hui lets out a sigh of relief and gives Shen Yuan a bright smile as he shoves the pile of neatly stored documents onto his arms. "Shen-shidi is the best! Take them within this shichen to Shang-shixiong's office and if he has any questions, tell him to contact Mu-shixiong after he arrives from his mission!"

Shen Yuan nods, holding the documents tightly in his hands before deciding it would be safer to store them inside his pouch — which cannot hold much due to their low-quality, but it's enough to keep the papers safe until he arrives. Zhang Hui doesn't bother staying for longer, uttering a quick farewell and immediately scrambling away from the workshop to grab more crates.

Looking towards the water clock on the corner of the room, Shen Yuan sighs as he notices it's already halfway through the shichen. If he hurries, he can go and return before dinner starts, and hopefully snatch a good seat and warm, fresh meal for himself.

Without wasting another minute, Shen Yuan puts away the materials he had been grinding before and sets off towards the rainbow bridge.

The rainbow bridge is, as expected, more crowded than Shen Yuan wants it to be. This hour is like Cang Qiong's rush hour, just before the disciples gather to have dinner together, so the inter-peak activity doubles — everyone's trying to finish difficult tasks before the day is over.

Shen Yuan notices that some people stare at him, which happens almost every time he's out and about at any place that is not Qian Cao — no matter how long he has entered this damn game, this is the one thing that always happens regardless of what Shen Yuan does. Thankfully, he's growing used to it, albeit slower than he wishes; going from a socially isolated sick young master to a scandalous celebrity is hard!

An Ding Peak isn't that far away from Qian Cao, at least when compared to other peaks. Cang Qiong has a standard mountain range, with the tallest peak (housing Qiong Ding, of course) standing roughly on the middle of all peaks, while the other peaks are scattered

across the range according to their rank and specific needs. For example, Yan Shou, the beast peak, is located on the lowest peak, but is one of the biggest ones in the range.

Qing Jing and Bai Zhan stand on opposite sides, both close to Qiong Ding but considerably apart from each other. Shen Yuan thinks it's funnily poetic. Meanwhile, Qian Cao is located on a lower peak than most, but it is also considerably bigger than the average — they do grow a lot of crops and herbs there, after all!

Shen Yuan glances at the imposing peak in the distance, it slowly growing taller as he approaches the entrance gate. From the moment Shen Yuan can have a clear vision of whatever's going inside An Ding, he already knows it is more chaotic than Bai Zhan — multiple carts and crates being carried around, disciples running desperately as they count their inventory, the look of complete exhaustion on their faces…

An Ding really is the equivalent of a xianxia logistics company.

At the entrance, Shen Yuan hesitates for a moment, wondering if he should ask one of these overworked disciples for directions. Knowing he doesn't have any other way of knowing where Shang Qinghua's office is, Shen Yuan sighs and takes the risk of tapping onto a disciple's shoulder.

"Xi-shimei, I already told you to haul crate 58 to the central warehouse-" The disciple says before turning around and stopping mid sentence, looking at Shen Yuan with surprise for a moment. "Oh, is there anything shidi needs help with…?"

"I… Yes, this one needs some help," Shen Yuan replies, surprised that he hasn't been snubbed like in every other peak. He smiles and continues. "There's a few documents this one needs to deliver to Shang-shixiong. Can shijie give this shidi some directions?"

The surprise in the disciple's face is exchanged by a bright smile. "But of course! This shijie will take you there."

Shen Yuan widens his eyes, looking around at the busy entrance. "It is fine if shijie has something else to do, this one does not want to impose himself…"

"Aiya, don't worry about that," the An Ding disciple smiles once again, looking oddly touched by Shen Yuan's words. She gives a paper and some instructions to another disciple before starting to walk. "It's rare enough to have someone be polite to us, and in any case, the others can survive for a few minutes without me. What is your name, shidi?"

"Shen Yuan," he replies, following the An Ding disciple as they walk past countless other disciples working around them. Thankfully, the disciple doesn't have any reaction to his name. "What about shijie?"

"Xia Qi," the disciple answers, looking at Shen Yuan who is observing the landscape and buildings. "Is this Shen-shidi's first time visiting An Ding?"

He nods, taking notice of how similar yet different the peak is from others. As Shen Yuan had thought, its buildings are indeed organized in a structured manner, much more organized than

Bai Zhan. There's not many scenic spots, but the peak has a chaotic yet comforting vibe that reminds him of Qian Cao, in a way — from observing their interactions, it seems like the disciples here are also pretty close knit, even more than in Qian Cao.

"This shidi has joined the sect recently," Shen Yuan explains.

Truthfully, if not for the absurdity of being in an endless pay-to-win game grind, Shen Yuan would have explored the other peaks already. There's so much lore, so much to learn from the way the peaks interact with each other, so many things Airplane never bothered to mention…

Xia Qi hums in understanding. "Shidi must be nervous about meeting Shang-shixiong, then. Do not worry, our dashixiong might look strict at first, but he's a nice person!"

Shen Yuan grimaces to himself at the description, wondering if Shang Qinghua is that good at acting or if others are just oblivious. *Sorry to break it to you, but your dashixiong will sell this sect and let you all burn to death!* Still, knowing he doesn't have any way of proving the An Ding Head Disciple's true nature, Shen Yuan conceals his disgust and smiles. "Indeed, Shang-shixiong is nice."

"Oh, has Shen-shidi met him before?" Xia Qi enthusiastically asks, causing Shen Yuan to notice his slip of tongue.

Hiding his embarrassment, Shen Yuan nods. "…Yes, this shidi met Shang-shixiong once, at the rainbow bridge."

Xia Qi nods, smiling and going on a tangent about how Shang Qinghua is helpful and nice and always stands up for An Ding when he can. Honestly, Shen Yuan is thankful Xia Qi somehow didn't hear of the rampant rumors about himself, because he can't start to imagine how long her list of compliments towards Shang Qinghua would be if she knew.

Is this how others see Shang Qinghua? It's understandable his peak would have a more favorable view of him, but do the other peaks think the same of him? It would explain why Shang Qinghua was never outed as a spy, even when sneaking Mobei Jun inside the sect — Shen Yuan hates to admit it, but Shang Qinghua is clearly skilled in covering his traces and building an image for himself.

Soon enough, Xia Qi guides him towards a large building complex, blabbering about Shang Qinghua all the way. Shen Yuan tunes out the praise to observe the buildings, impressed at the number of disciples going on and about all over the place; they really are the underappreciated office workers of Cang Qiong…

Xia Qi stops in front of a door, turning to Shen Yuan with a smile on her face. "We have arrived. This shijie would love to talk more with shidi, but there's so much left for this one to do…"

"This shidi thanks shijie for guiding him," Shen Yuan replies with a small smile, sincerely appreciating that someone helped him even if he wishes the walk was quieter. After experiencing the other peaks and their subpar education, Shen Yuan will choose a yapper over a snob in every occasion.

Giving him a final farewell, Xia Qi quickly goes back and her silhouette eventually disappears from Shen Yuan's line of sight. Breathing in and out, Shen Yuan takes out the documents and prepares himself mentally as he knocks on the wooden door.

A muffled voice tells him to come inside, which Shen Yuan reluctantly does. The first thing he notices when entering the office is that it's tidier than he expected; much unlike the chaotic environment just outside the door. The office itself isn't huge, and all the available space is used wisely, with multiple bookshelves and storage drawers neatly organized.

Another thing that catches Shen Yuan's attention is how *cold* this room is, despite the lit brazier on the corner of the room.

Shang Qinghua sits in front of a low desk, with a pile of documents to his left and a brush in hand. Upon looking up, the An Ding Head Disciple's expression shifts into one of surprise for a brief second before it returns to its usual unnerving smile.

"Shen-shidi," Shang Qinghua calmly greets him, lowering the brush onto the table. "To what this shixiong owes this visit?"

Shen Yuan bows his head in greeting, holding the documents in his hands tightly before approaching the low table. "This shidi has been asked to bring a few documents regarding Qian Cao's inventory."

Lowering himself, he hands the bundle of documents to Shang Qinghua, who quickly accepts and takes a look through them. While the An Ding Head Disciple is checking the contents, Shen Yuan is stuck in an awkward position of staring at the floor and waiting until Shang Qinghua is done. It's harder to conceal his nervousness when he's so close to the head disciple, and it's even harder to keep his hands from trembling slightly with how cold the office is.

"It seems that all documents needed are here," Shang Qinghua remarks, bundling the papers neatly as he looks towards the other. The head disciple's expression changes into one of mild concern that Shen Yuan isn't sure is real. "Is Shen-shidi alright? Your hands are trembling."

He nods as he clenches his hands against one another in an attempt to warm them up. "This one is fine, just a tad cold…"

Realization hits Shen Yuan like a truck. It's cold outside, without a doubt, but why is Shang Qinghua's office, a room with a lit brazier burning the most expensive coal one can get, still so frigidly cold? From what Shen Yuan can see, the coal has been burning for quite some time, enough that it's already emitting a reddish light under it — it should be long enough for this room to be cozy.

No, surely Shang Qinghua isn't brazen enough to sneak Mobei Jun into the sect while he's a head disciple, right? Shen Yuan wonders to himself, trying to recall everything he can about the spy and the demon king. Mobei Jun, as a side character, showed up more often than the future An Ding Peak Lord, and as Luo Binghe's right hand man, he had been thoroughly described.

Every time Mobei Jun entered a room, the temperature lowered enough to make one shiver immediately — and the longer he stays, the colder it gets. Shen Yuan can tell the brazier is just now starting to do its work, as the stale air in his face gradually becomes warmer with each passing second; Mobei Jun isn't here now, at least.

Smoothing over his expression to conceal any panic or anxiety, Shen Yuan keeps quiet as he waits for Shang Qinghua's response, hearing the sound of his own heartbeat as if it were drums. Even when Shen Yuan is staring down at the head disciple sitting on the floor, Shang Qinghua's stare makes him feel like he's the one on the ground.

"Hm, it is indeed cold," Shang Qinghua casually replies, his eyes fixed on Shen Yuan's figure as if analyzing his every single movement. "This shixiong was distracted and only remembered to light up the brazier not long ago. This one hopes Shen-shidi can overlook this shixiong's carelessness."

How can he lie so effortlessly? Shen Yuan thinks as he nods along to the answer.

"Ah, shixiong shouldn't worry," Shen Yuan nervously replies, his mind working overtime to come up with a decent excuse. At least his nervousness can be explained by the conversation and their rank difference, but if he doesn't come up with a decent answer, then Shang Qinghua might start thinking something's amiss. "This one was already feeling cold from walking all the way from Qian Cao, and my cultivation isn't that good…"

The An Ding Head Disciple hums, seemingly convinced by the other's answer. Shen Yuan doesn't relax just yet, although he feels less anxious than before — after all, he didn't lie when he said his cultivation is shit, mostly because he has been focusing on reaching a decent intelligence level and has no spare time to cultivate seriously. So, him being more sensitive to cold makes complete sense, and should be enough to make Shang Qinghua lower his guard.

"Shidi should wait before walking back to Qian Cao, then," Shang Qinghua says, raising from his seat and taking the bundle of documents given by Shen Yuan to a drawer. "Mu-shidi would be upset if one of his shidis caught a cold while running an errand here."

【 Quest 'Deliver the monthly inventory to Shang Qinghua' completed! +100 R-Points, +20 Reputation Points. User's reputation level is now 'Established Peer'. 】

There's no time left to celebrate his new R-Points and upgraded reputation level, as Shang Qinghua looks expectantly towards him, clearly wishing for a specific answer to his question.

"Wait here…?" Shen Yuan mutters, freezing on the spot as he wonders if this is some sort of test or just otome game bullshit. He raises his head, meeting the other's eyes, which is enough to shake Shen Yuan back to reality; with a slight tint on his cheeks from having his excuse used against himself, he relents. "…If shixiong insists so."

【 Shang Qinghua thinks User's embarrassed expression is endearing. +10 Affection Points added to 'An Ding's Head Disciple, Shang Qinghua'. 】

What's wrong with this man?! Shen Yuan screams internally as he reads the System's notification. Shang Qinghua is a complete sadist, no doubt he sold this sect for whatever

Mobei Jun gave him!

“Shen-shidi may take the seat in front of him,” the An Ding Head Disciple says, bringing another batch of papers onto the table.

Shen Yuan does as instructed, sitting on the cushion in front of him stiffly as he watches the head disciple sit down and start working. At least the cushion is fluffy and comfortable…

Looking at his fingers, then the wall, then the floor, Shen Yuan eventually runs out of places to vacantly stare as he waits for Shang Qinghua to tell him to get out. Neither him nor the head disciple say anything; Shen Yuan doesn’t want to talk with him, nor does he want to interrupt the other. His fluttering eyes finally focus on the table, looking at Shang Qinghua’s work flow in an attempt not to bore himself to death.

It seems like the An Ding Head Disciple is sorting the documents, placing thin, small slips of colored paper in between scrolls, almost like a post-it or clip. Shen Yuan observes Shang Qinghua until the other eventually notices the stare upon his person.

“Is there something shidi wants to say?” Shang Qinghua asks, gazing towards Shen Yuan for a brief moment before his eyes go back to looking at the papers.

Shen Yuan is caught off-guard by the question, but is relived once he notices Shang Qinghua doesn’t seem annoyed or angry about it. “This one is curious about the colored papers…”

“Oh,” Shang Qinghua mutters, looking at the other once again. “It is a method for organizing large quantities of documents into sections with the same content; for example, red for finance and cyan for trade.”

Nodding to the explanation, Shen Yuan remembers his sister used to do a similar thing with her studying materials. “It sounds like a good method to use.”

【 Shang Qinghua thinks User’s words are nice. Special Attribute ‘Praise’ increased to 2%. +10 Affection Points. 】

It takes everything in Shen Yuan’s body to not pass out on the spot. He had said it as a thoughtless, honest but low-effort answer, how did it somehow unlock Shang Qinghua’s special attribute?! This is their second meeting, how is this even possible — Shen Yuan didn’t manage to discover Liu Qingge’s attribute on their last meeting…

Besides, this is a strangely weird attribute — does Shang Qinghua have a superiority *and* an inferiority complex?! Or is he so in love with himself that he favors others who constantly praise him? Whatever it is, Shen Yuan doesn’t want to touch this mess with a two feet pole, and he’d rather deal with Yue Qingyuan’s situationship with Shen Qingqiu than this!

At least the Qiong Ding Head Disciple is nice to him and doesn’t constantly look like he wants to swallow Shen Yuan with his eyes!

“It indeed is,” Shang Qinghua replies, the corner of his lips raising a little bit as he looks back towards the documents.

Shen Yuan wants to run out of the room as fast as possible, back to the comfort of Qian Cao, yet his body stays frozen. He's managed to keep his expression under control, but he's not sure for how long he can do it — at least it looks like Shang Qinghua is wrapping up his work soon, having organized most of the pile by now.

As Shen Yuan thinks about whether he should come up with an excuse and leave — after all, the room is already warm and he really wants to return as soon as possible —, his eyes catch glimpse of Shang Qinghua's left wrist. He hadn't paid much attention to it before, as it had been mostly covered by the long sleeves of the head disciple's robe, but upon closer inspection, it seems like there's something wrong with it; Shen Yuan can't see it clearly, but there seems to be a few purple bruises on it.

Upon further reflection, Shen Yuan realizes Shang Qinghua hasn't been using his left hand as much — he grabbed a few documents with both, but never used the left hand without the support from the other.

"…Is Shang-shixiong injured?" Shen Yuan abruptly asks, to both his and Shang Qinghua's surprise. Feeling awkward under the head disciple's intense gaze directed upon him, Shen Yuan elaborates. "Shixiong's wrist, it seems like there's something wrong with it…"

It's the first time Shang Qinghua looks uncomfortable. "It is nothing major. Shidi needn't worry."

Shen Yuan hesitates for a few seconds, wondering if he should insist on taking a look. Sighing to himself, Shen Yuan decides to give it a try. He's from Qian Cao, after all, it would be weird if he didn't offer to help. "Still, if Shang-shixiong feels comfortable, this shidi can try to help…"

Shang Qinghua stops for a second, his eyes difficult to read as he stares at the other. Letting out a sigh, the An Ding head disciple finally relents. "Very well. Shidi may take a look."

Reaching his wrist out, Shen Yuan carefully pulls back the head disciple's hems enough to see the injury. It is thanks to Shen Yuan's training that he doesn't let out a gasp, his eyes widening just slightly as he stares at the myriad of purples and blues on Shang Qinghua's wrist.

Shen Yuan touches the sides of the head disciple's wrist and observes the bump on top of it. He then places two fingers on it to access the damage. "Shixiong has dislocated his wrist, but it seems like his ligaments aren't torn. This shidi can place it back and treat the inflammation, although it will hurt more since this one doesn't have any pain relief medicine."

Honestly, it's impressive Shang Qinghua hasn't gone to Qian Cao for treatment. Dislocated wrists hurt terribly, especially if a person continues to use them as if nothing was wrong — it's a miracle his blood vessels and tissues aren't completely dead around that area.

"It's fine," Shang Qinghua replies, looking away from him for the first time. "Just treat it as you would."

Shen Yuan nods, thanking the heavens his dexterity is high enough to make the experience less painful and as quick as possible — the last thing he needs is to be on Shang Qinghua's enemy list. Feeling the bones once again just to be sure, Shen Yuan breathes in and places his hands against the upwards bone, replaying the maneuver he was taught over and over in his head.

With one swift motion, the bone pops back into its original place, making a nauseating sound as it does.

There's no time left to lose, so Shen Yuan immediately places two fingers upon the head disciple's skin and starts working on the ruptured blood vessels and tissues. Since the damage isn't as severe as it could be, Shen Yuan manages to restore most of the area, although he cannot completely get rid of the inflammation without access to Qian Cao's concoctions.

Once Shen Yuan finishes, he looks towards the An Ding Head Disciple. Shang Qinghua's face is pale and a few drops of sweat accumulate on his forehead, which isn't surprising considering he didn't have access to a painkiller.

"It is back into its place," Shen Yuan says, observing the head disciple's reaction. Shang Qinghua looks up and nods, his face still pale but looking more attentive. "This shidi can write down a prescription for the pain and inflammation, if shixiong wants…"

"It's alright, shidi has helped this one enough," Shang Qinghua replies, touching his healed wrist with his other hand and analyzing it. "Shen-shidi is indeed fit for Qian Cao."

Shen Yuan smiles, probably his first sincere smile in front of the An Ding Head Disiciple. When Shang Qinghua is not looking down on others and staring at him like a snake ready to strike, he's a surprisingly normal person — unfortunately, Shen Yuan doesn't feel brave enough to deal with the whole 'traitor' situation just so he can figure out who Shang Qinghua really is.

【 Shang Qinghua thinks User's smile is pretty. +5 Affection Points added to 'An Ding's Head Disciple, Shang Qinghua. 】

Ignoring the growing warmth in his face — how he wishes he didn't have a thin face! —, Shen Yuan bows his head. "Thanking Shang-shixiong for his words. This shidi will have to return now, wishing shixiong a quick recovery!"

Speeding out of the room, Shen Yuan ignores the frigid air blowing against his face, walking his way back to Qian Cao as he pretends the reddish tone in his cheeks is there because of the cold.

Chapter 10: don’t be short when inside qing jing’s library

Chapter Notes

> hello!! how is everyone doing? once again, this chapter has taken a little long but in compensation, here is 7k words of sy wifebeaming everyone he meets!!
> thank u guys for reading the fic <3 hope u like the chapter!!!
>
> bsky: shiyooji

Shen Yuan can’t avoid it anymore; he needs to go to Qing Jing to find the damned demonic beasts physiology books.

It has been three days since his strange trip to An Ding, and in these three days, Shen Yuan intensified his efforts to raise his dexterity skill — which thankfully worked, as he reached level 5 and even raised his intelligence skill to level 4. With the normal skills raised to their necessary level for the inner disciple promotion, Shen Yuan has no excuse to avoid his visit to Qing Jing.

He tried asking for his shijies and shixiongs to grab the book for him, but no one accepted his request. Since Shen Yuan doesn’t want to spend his hard-earned money, he decided it would be cheaper to just go by himself and pray he won’t be bothered by Shen Qingqiu there.

Knowing this game, Shen Yuan knows the probability of Shen Qingqiu conveniently being where he is must be around 99%. Truthfully, it only took so long for Shen Yuan to finally drag himself there because he needed to prep himself mentally beforehand.

Yue Qingyuan will undoubtedly be mentioned at least twice, because Shen Qingqiu is as obsessed with the future sect leader as he is insufferable. After much time spent analyzing the best course of action when faced with such a crisis, Shen Yuan decided to take a logical approach — explain why Shen Qingqiu’s point is wrong, even if it means embarrassing himself while doing it.

It worked last time, so why not try it?

Upon reaching the graceful entrance gate leading to Qing Jing Peak, Shen Yuan realizes he underestimated how nerve-wrecking it is to be here. Without a veil to cover his face, he immediately becomes the center of attention as soon as he is spotted — and Qing Jing disciples are not subtle at all when they’re talking about you.

It feels like those cringy movie scenes where a protagonist enters a room and everyone stops talking and stares — but a thousand times more awkward than it’s made to be in movies.

Shen Yuan doesn't necessarily feel intimidated, but he does feel embarrassed; can't they at least pretend they aren't talking about him?

Now, Shen Yuan has two choices; emulate Shen Qingqiu's nasty behavior and hope it makes people scared to approach him, or act like he usually does and hope no one bothers him. Shen Yuan picks the latter, as he knows he would embarrass himself trying to pretend he's a stuck-up snob.

Shen Yuan roughly remembers the way to the library, which is great, as it means he doesn't need to run around asking for directions again — only to be rudely ignored by every Qing Jing disciple around. How did Luo Binghe withstand being a part of this peak filled with wannabe mean girls?

At least Qing Jing's scenery is breathtaking, so much that it calms Shen Yuan's nervousness a little bit. Ignoring all weird stares coming his direction, Shen Yuan eventually sees the tall, imposing pavilion that is Qing Jing's library. Cheering to himself, Shen Yuan proudly walks towards the building and makes his mind to grab the bestiary and go back to Qian Cao as quickly as humanly possible.

With one hand, Shen Yuan grabs the door handle and pushes the tall wooden door, looking around in awe at the grand and elegant library.

Qing Jing's library is known throughout the realm for a reason, one that Shen Yuan immediately understands upon entering it. He knew the building was gigantic from outside, but it somehow looks bigger once walking inside; full of tall bookshelves made of expensive spirit wood, filled with hidden talismans for preservation and cleaning, every shelf filled with countless scrolls and books painstakingly labeled one by one.

It's quiet, but not in a scary manner; more like a comforting, grandma's-house-during-a-sunny-spring-day vibe. Shen Yuan had expected it would be an overwhelming place, so much that he prepared himself mentally for it — who would have known it feels so different from Qing Jing's general mood?

There's not many disciples around, and those who are inside barely pay attention to anything besides their books. Shen Yuan quietly makes his way through the bookshelves, exploring the library until he finds the area of expertise he needs.

After some minutes, Shen Yuan finally figures out where the demonic studies section is. Looking through the bookshelves, Shen Yuan's eyes glimmer with all the available books and scrolls in this place — this is heaven for PIDW fans who actually care about the world and plot! All editions of the demonic languages dictionary, southern demonic culture etiquette books, even a guide on clothing throughout the demonic realm…

Shen Yuan's eyes settle on one of the books he needs. Demonic beasts anatomy atlas, filled with detailed drawings of all sorts of creatures from Demonic Northern Desert Beetles to Skinner Demons — this will be the first time Shen Yuan will have fun while studying…

Reaching his hand towards the book, Shen Yuan frowns as he notices it's placed a little too high on the bookshelf. He tries again, tiptoeing as tall as he can in an attempt to get a grasp

on the book, yet his hands barely scratch against the hard leather cover, to his dismay and embarrassment. Still, no matter how warm his face is from the nervousness and shame of not getting it on the first try, Shen Yuan keeps trying, even jumping a little bit while he's at it.

That is, until a pale hand reaches for the book effortlessly, pulling it from the shelf with no issue.

Shen Yuan's stomach drops as he whips his head around, only to be met with Shen Qingqiu's infuriatingly pretty face staring right back at him, his hand still keeping the book above Shen Yuan's head as he stares back with a strange look in his face that the other assumes is annoyance.

【 Shen Qingqiu thinks User looks silly while trying to grab the book. +8 Affection Points added to 'Qing Jing's Head Disciple, Shen Qingqiu'. 】

Fuck you too, Shen Yuan curses in his head, keeping his mouth wisely shut as he stares back at the head disciple. Shen Yuan is not silly, the silly one is whoever designed these bookshelves to be so goddamn tall and left no ladders to help poor, defenseless disciples trying to grab their books!

"Stop acting so childishly here," Shen Qingqiu chastises him, although his tone is not as rude as Shen Yuan expected. "If it is too difficult to reach, call for one of the librarians to help."

Shen Yuan holds back a thousand curses as he grits his teeth. *If your peakmates weren't so stuck up, maybe I would!!!* "This one will remember Head Disciple Shen's words."

Shen Qingqiu is way too close to him for Shen Yuan's liking, and the head disciple seems to notice it, as he retreats in such a hurried, urgent manner that it mildly offends Shen Yuan. Is it really that bad to be near him?!

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Shen Qingqiu hands the book to Shen Yuan and starts speaking once the other takes it. "Very well, if there is anything else needed…"

At first, Shen Yuan doesn't want to ask Shen Qingqiu, but after thinking about it, he realizes it might be the only way to find the other book he's looking for before another insanely cliché trope catches up to him — if he's already with Shen Qingqiu, then the plot is less likely to pull some strange bullshit on him.

"Actually, there is something," Shen Yuan slowly replies, watching Shen Qingqiu raise his eyebrow, prompting the other to continue. "…This shidi can't find a book."

"Hmph, do I look like a librarian?" Shen Qingqiu mutters to himself, probably intending for Shen Yuan to hear as he doesn't bother lowering his tone by much. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes and ignores the head disciple's snarky remark, fully expecting the other to point him towards said 'librarian'. "Which book?"

Blinking in surprise, Shen Yuan speaks once he realizes Shen Qingqiu will actually help him instead of complaining. "The latest edition of the demonic beast compendium. Does Shen-shixiong know where to find it?"

A reddish tint spreads through the head disciple's face before a 'clank' noise echoes through the library and Shen Qingqiu covers his face with his infamous fan, waving it gracefully as he covers half his face. "Hm, this one knows, indeed. Why is shidi interested in it?"

Shen Yuan frowns slightly at the odd question and Shen Qingqiu's weird behavior, but answers nevertheless. "This one enjoys learning about demonic beasts, and heard Qing Jing's library has this book. Besides, the compendium is renowned through the realm for its thoroughness, so this one has been thinking about reading it ever since joining Cang Qiong Sect…"

Honestly, half of what Shen Yuan is saying is utter bullshit. It's sort of true — he has been thinking about reading it ever since he entered the game and found out the compendium exists! —, but at the same time, should he answer Shen Qingqiu's question as if he were taking an entrance exam just so he can read a book? Maybe Shen Yuan just wants to learn some cool monster lore!

【 Shen Qingqiu likes User's answer. +12 Affection Points added to 'Qing Jing's Head Disciple, Shen Qingqiu'. 】

The System's notification does nothing but increase Shen Yuan's confusion. At least it seems like he has passed Shen Qingqiu's mysterious test?

Without any warning, Shen Qingqiu's fan shuts close and the head disciple turns around. "Follow me."

Shen Yuan's brain takes a few seconds to understand the head disciple's command, and when he does, Shen Qingqiu has already started walking away. Shen Yuan quickly fastens his pace and starts following the other, passing through countless bookshelves and eventually the library's entrance, to his utter confusion. Is the book outside the library?

Despite his questions, Shen Yuan quietly walks behind the Qing Jing Head Disciple as they make their way through the peak, ignoring the baffled and hostile stares coming from every direction and eventually reaching some stone stairs that seem to go infinitely upwards through the breathtaking bamboo forest.

Shen Qingqiu starts casually climbing through the stairs without breaking his pace, seemingly not tired or breaking a sweat over the insanely long path. Shen Yuan tries his best to keep up, yet he cannot help but occasionally slowing down to catch his breath before he notices Shen Qingqiu is at least fifteen steps ahead of him. Cursing the head disciple and his full lineage a thousand times in his head, Shen Yuan ignores the ache in his legs and continues to climb.

After what felt like hours, they finally reach a leveled piece of terrain. Shen Yuan is shamefully panting, in spite of his efforts to contain it; Shen Qingqiu turns to look at him, an amused grin in his face as he looks towards the exhausted disciple.

【 Shen Qingqiu thinks User looks pathetic. +4 Affection Points added to 'Qing Jing's Head Disciple, Shen Qingqiu'. 】

No wonder he's the villain, Shen Yuan cries to himself as he angrily stares back at the Qing Jing Head Disciple, but refrains from saying anything. Laughing at his suffering like this, truly a behavior befitting of the scum villain!

Holding his angry stare for a record three seconds, Shen Yuan quickly diverts his eyes before he accidentally annoys Shen Qingqiu more than he should; he glances at the house behind the head disciple, frowning for a bit before his eyes widen in realization. This is the infamous bamboo house, the place where Shen Qingqiu will ruthlessly pour tea on Luo Binghe's head in the future!

Shen Yuan excitedly looks at the house, feeling as if he's a tourist at a historical monument. In contrast to the future things that will happen, the bamboo house is a structure that gives off a sense of serenity, almost like a hidden abode meant for the most elusive of immortals to live in; a peace where reality cannot reach, staying hidden behind the lush bamboo forest that covers all nearby land.

"Stay here," Shen Qingqiu commands, immediately going inside without even waiting for Shen Yuan's answer.

Irritated by the Qing Jing's Head Disciple behavior, Shen Yuan rolls his eyes once he sees the other has entered the bamboo house. What was Airplane thinking, to add Shen Qingqiu of all people as a romantic option? Not only is the Qing Jing Head Disciple insufferable, he's also inconsiderate and rude!

Shen Yuan can't help but wonder if the head disciple's behavior would be the same if they did not look alike, and the whole situation with Yue Qingyuan didn't exist.

Widening his eyes as he remembers the Qiong Ding Head Disciple, Shen Yuan notices Shen Qingqiu hasn't mentioned him at all. Is the Qing Jing Head Disciple feeling well today, or is it that Shen Yuan's words actually went through his thick, stubborn head?

If so, Shen Yuan sincerely hopes things continue to be as peaceful. One of his biggest worries whenever interacting with both Shen Qingqiu and Yue Qingyuan is their strange relationship, and how it can backfire horribly on Shen Yuan if Shen Qingqiu decides to constantly pick a fight with him. After all, the Qing Jing Head Disciple has been a notorious villain since arriving in Cang Qiong, and by this point of the story, he has already tried to murder Liu Qingge once.

If Shen Yuan can keep Shen Qingqiu at bay, hostile but not directly threatening towards him, it will make his time inside this game much smoother — Shen Yuan remembers a few leaks from the PIDW forums saying Shen Qingqiu could turn hostile during Yue Qingyuan's route, depending on the player's favorability with him.

Shen Yuan doesn't plan on taking Yue Qingyuan's route, but he must be prepared for whatever is thrown in his direction; and since there are less restrictions than if he were playing the game normally, then Shen Yuan will gladly use it to his advantage and be completely honest to Shen Qingqiu instead of acting like a wronged maiden who needs their male lead to protect them.

Hell, if needed, Shen Yuan can try to make these two talk their issues out like normal people!

The sound of a door closing brings Shen Yuan back to reality. Looking up, he notices Shen Qingqiu is back from the bamboo house, this time carrying a large book in his hands as he walks towards the other. So the compendium was with the Qing Jing Head Disciple…

"Take it," Shen Qingqiu says, giving the book to Shen Yuan without their hands touching at all. *At least this dog-blood cliché can be avoided,* he thinks.

Shen Yuan bows his head towards the other, keeping his manners even though he is still pissed off about the previous affection point gain. "Thanking Shen-shixiong. When does this one need to return the books?"

"Two weeks is the usual timeframe allowed," Shen Qingqiu replies. "If there is a need to extend the time limit, apply a second qi signature on the cover."

The confusion in Shen Yuan's face is very obvious. "Qi signature?"

"…Those Qian Cao half-wits couldn't bother explaining, of course," the Qing Jing Head Disciple sneers, his tone filled with annoyance. Shen Yuan bites his tongue in order not to insult the other back. Those are his shijies and shixiongs that Shen Qingqiu is talking about! "Apply a small amount of qi onto the book to have it borrowed on your name. There is no need to write your name down in any registry, as the qi signature is sent back to the library's archive."

Shen Yuan's eyes shine with excitement at the information — which had not been mentioned at all in PIDW, of course. This is the coolest part of being in this game, regardless of how Shen Yuan wishes to go back to his normal life; the promise of being a badass cultivator and peerless immortal is enough to make anyone jump with glee, especially someone who has been stuck in a sickly body for his whole life as Shen Yuan has!

"This is so cool," Shen Yuan mutters to himself, holding the books in his hands as if they were the coolest gadget he had ever seen. It's like an online signature! "Just a little bit is needed, right?"

Shen Qingqiu nods, not saying anything else as Shen Yuan grabs a single book in his right hand. Unable to hide his excitement, Shen Yuan smiles widely as he closes his eyes and sends a small amount of qi towards the book cover. Once he opens his eyes, Shen Yuan sees a faint blue glow envelop the cover for a second before it returns to normal; a gasp of awe leaves his mouth as he watches in amazement.

【Shen Qingqiu thinks User is acting childishly. +8 Affection Points added to 'Qing Jing's Head Disciple, Shen Qingqiu'.】

Embarrassment spreads through Shen Yuan's body like fire as he reads the System's notification. *Can't you see anyone being happy without being miserable about it?* Shen Yuan thinks, genuinely puzzled on why he even gained affection points if Shen Qingqiu thinks he is so childish. In fact, all interactions that have earned him points with the Qing Jing Head Disciple are a tad difficult to understand — does Shen Qingqiu like or loathe him?!

Is Shen Qingqiu's route just a rivals to lovers trope? Because this makes absolutely no sense! Shen Qingqiu himself looks confused by his own thoughts — honestly, the Qing Jing Head Disciple looks as if he has eaten something bitter yet tries to hide it, his expression showing hits of discomfort and something else that Shen Yuan can't quite pinpoint.

"…It has worked," Shen Qingqiu says, averting his eyes from the other. "Now scram back to Qian Cao or Qiong Ding. This one has more to do than stand idly all day."

Shen Yuan is a little confused by the sudden shift in the head disciple's mood, but complies with his words nevertheless. Not like Shen Yuan wants to spend more time with this ticking time bomb that can't help but mention Qiong Ding out of absolutely nowhere!

Bowing his head in farewell, Shen Yuan quickly turns around without arguing back, making his way down Qing Jing without noticing the intense gaze directed towards his person.

It has been four days since Shen Yuan came back from Qing Jing, and he has been spending every free hour of his day studying without stopping.

Contrary to what he first thought, it will be hard to bring Shen Yuan's demonic zoology skill up to 100% — it truly means mastery of a subject, and Airplane's focus on papapapa scenes instead of describing the world he build more means that Shen Yuan has more to learn than expected.

While Shen Yuan has deep knowledge about every single species that have showed up in all of the thousand chapters of that godforsaken novel, he lacks any technical knowledge of them — specific things like their class, what family of demonic beasts they are a part of, their migration patterns, etc… At least it seems like he has done some heavy lifting by knowing their general characteristics, abilities, habitats and utilities for cultivation.

There are a few species that haven't shown up in PIDW, too. They are mostly small, insignificant animals that make sense to exist in this world — if a mule exists in this world, then a donkey does too, even if it wasn't mentioned. Regardless of what Airplane wrote, it seems like the world has automatically filled in any gaps left by the hack author.

In these four days, Shen Yuan has managed to raise his skill by a measly 2%, without using any speed boosts. If his calculations are right, then Shen Yuan will need to study in this rhythm for 16 more days to master demonic zoology without any boosts — more than enough time, since he has 21 days left to complete his task.

Stretching his arms as he finishes another study session, Shen Yuan glances outside the small window in his room, noticing it is already way past midday. As if prompted by the thought, his stomach starts to grumble, making Shen Yuan sigh as he rises from his chair and starts making his way to the dining hall.

If he's not mistaken, he has a shift later at night. Today should be a fairly calm shift, as it is the day of the Mid-Autumn Festival — most Qian Cao disciples are either on leave or planning to go down the mountain for the festivities, and so are the disciples of other peaks.

Shen Yuan thinks it is a pity he cannot go, but at the same time, he did not bother requesting a leave, so it is natural he has been chosen for tonight's shift.

The dining hall is not full — in fact, it is considerably empty considering the time of the day. Shen Yuan grabs the bowl of roasted duck, noticing how the dishes today are more elaborate than usual. Qian Cao's menu isn't the worst, but it is very reminiscent of hospital food; since Shen Yuan was already used to it, he did not mind as much, yet he still found himself craving some extra flavor from time to time.

It is easy to find an empty table when most of the peak is away, so Shen Yuan picks a random spot near the window. Most of the disciples inside the dining hall are either alone or sitting in cliques, and since his 'clique' of sorts has left to visit their families and go down the mountain, Shen Yuan finds himself alone as well.

Not that it bothers him, truthfully. He is used to it, although he misses the constant chatter and gossip whenever he sat with Wang Haoran, Han Lingyu and Fu Qiao — who had attached herself to Shen Yuan after he helped her. His shijie is a pretty nice person, although a little more hyper than he is used to, but still a good friend. Honestly, Shen Yuan even feels a little bad about calling her a 'Task Giving NPC' before.

Eating the duck slowly, Shen Yuan takes longer than usual to finish. He has the whole afternoon for himself, which translates into studying for hours until he has to join the night shift, but Shen Yuan isn't feeling bothered by it. It is quite interesting to have access to info he would otherwise not have, so why not use some time to learn it?

Just as Shen Yuan finishes the bowl of mildly seasoned duck, a familiar face suddenly sits on the seat in front of him.

"Han-shijie!" Shen Yuan exclaims, eyes widening in surprise as he did not expect to see his shijie today. "Weren't you going down the mountain today?"

"Indeed I am," Han Lingyu replies, a small smile forming in her face as she speaks. "In fact, this shijie is going down the mountain soon."

"Ah, that's nice," he replies, feeling slightly envious his shijie has managed to take the day off, but nonetheless happy for her. After all, Han Lingyu is one of the most hardworking disciples around Qian Cao, and she definitely deserves a break from the chaos of healthcare work. "Hoping shijie has a fun time at the festival! If shijie is feeling charitable, maybe bring back some candies for us poor overworked folks…."

Shen Yuan says the latter jokingly, although with a bit of hope in his heart. It has been months since he last tasted something *actually* sweet, since Qian Cao has a menu too healthy for his modern taste buds that crave sour and sweet ultra-processed candies — not that Han Lingyu would be able to find something like that, but still, street candies are better than no candies at all!

"Shidi needn't worry about that, he'll be able to bring it back himself," Han Lingyu says, throwing a slip of paper on the table. "Don't worry about tonight's shift either, Zhang-shidi is covering it for you."

Setting his eyes upon the slip, Shen Yuan's eyes immediately widen as he realizes what it is. Unable to contain his joy, a smile spreads through Shen Yuan's face. "No way…! Thanking shijie so much!"

Despite his previous acceptance at not going, Shen Yuan cannot deny this is the best thing that has happened to him recently. This may be a game, but the System made sure to breathe life into all corners of the world — even with Airplane's messy writing, every oddity somehow feels natural, from the unspecified time period and the multiple historical inaccuracies to the barely explained cultivation system.

He can only eagerly anticipate the crowded ancient streets, filled with vendors trying to overcharge people and families leisurely enjoying this festival. Would the streets smell as sweetly as his house did whenever his relatives gathered to bake during the holiday, would the activities be as fun as described by his siblings? In truth, this would be Shen Yuan's first Autumn Festival in quite a while — the last time he attended one was before turning 10, a little before he started immunosuppressants that rendered him incapable of attending large gatherings without significant risk.

In a strange way, this world he wishes to leave as soon as possible has become Shen Yuan's only way to experience life as a normal person, unbound by his health and deteriorating condition.

Han Lingyu smiles again, ushering Shen Yuan to run to the dormitories to change his clothes and grab a warm coat before they go down the mountain. Following her instructions, Shen Yuan picks the nicest outfit he has — a fairly simple grayish light blue robe alongside his tattered hemp cloak, barely hanging onto itself from continued use.

Besides the internet, the thing Shen Yuan misses the most from the modern world is his credit card…

After making sure he's carrying enough money on his person, Shen Yuan meets Han Lingyu outside the dormitories and they start making their way down the mountain. To Shen Yuan's delight, his shijie is much better off than him — she even paid some money to rent two seats on a cart going to Shuang Hu city!

Shen Yuan can't hide his excitement as the cart slowly makes its way to the city — how could he, when he's about to visit the place where Luo Binghe will defeat the Skinner Demon in order to save Ning Yingying in the future?! Besides that, it's the first time Shen Yuan is visiting anywhere that isn't inside the Cang Qiong mountain range, and to his surprise, he won't have to accompany any of the head disciples to do that.

Of course, Shen Yuan is well aware there's a chance *something* will happen, even if he does not know what. The setting is perfect; Mooncake festival, crowded streets, countless matchmakers and happy couples strolling through the streets. While Shen Yuan would prefer to spend his first outing without major issues, he would not mind meeting any of the love interests during the festivities — except Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua.

Considering he has met both of them recently, it would be unlikely for them to meet so soon. The game seems to be fairly balanced when it comes to distributing the appearance of each

head disciple, so it leaves Yue Qingyuan and Mu Qingfang as the most likely to appear — both of whom are fairly easy for Shen Yuan to deal with.

His attention is abruptly shifted as the cart stops moving, making Shen Yuan raise his head as he looks towards the city gates in front of him.

Han Lingyu hands a few coins to the driver and gets off the cart, and Shen Yuan quickly does the same. The city gates in front of him are imposing — they're probably not very big for ancient standards, considering Shuang Hu isn't a huge city, but they're still gigantic compared to the rest of the two-story buildings on the background.

Giving him a quick head nod, Han Lingyu starts making her way through the crowded streets, strategically avoiding areas filled with people while Shen Yuan is stuck looking around in awe at the lively ancient city in front of him.

"Shijie must have been in Shuang Hu before," Shen Yuan remarks with confidence, mostly because Han Lingyu clearly knows her way around town and she has been a disciple of Qian Cao for a few years. How could she not have been here before?

"Indeed," Han Lingyu replies, dodging a few slow pedestrians with easy. Shen Yuan barely manages to avoid them, being too used to Cang Qiong's easy traffic. "This shijie is from Shuang Hu city."

Shen Yuan widens his eyes in surprise. Thinking about it, Han Lingyu had not shared much about her private life, not even about her family; Shen Yuan thought it must have been because of her naturally closed-off nature, so he did not inquire about it either. To think his shijie is from such a close town…

"Wait, really? Then is shijie going to meet her family for the festival?" he asks, a little worried about the prospect of meeting Han Lingyu's relatives, at least considering his shijie is well-off and Shen Yuan is a nobody in this world filled with classism.

A few seconds pass before Han Lingyu answers. "…No, I do not get along well with my family."

"Oh…" Shen Yuan hesitantly replies, taking note of how sensitive the subject seems to be for the other disciple. "Well, then Han-shijie will have to stand this shidi for the whole festival!"

A small laugh comes out of the other's mouth, to Shen Yuan's relief. He has never been good with comforting people, so his best bet is to joke and hope it entertains the other person enough for them to be less sad — and it seems to have worked with Han Lingyu, who quickly lets go of the subject and he does not insist on talking further about it either.

Walking in a leisurely pace, they eventually make their way from the city outskirts to the center, filled with businesses and marketplaces scattered throughout the streets. The smell of pastries and snacks fills the air, the colorful paper lanterns hang from awnings and doors, giving the area a lively atmosphere.

Shen Yuan can't help but look around in awe, which attracts Han Lingyu's attention. "Is this shidi's first time in Shuang Hu's Mid-Autumn festival?"

Suddenly faced with a question that might turn things awkward if Shen Yuan doesn't answer it well, he nods while trying to hide his nervousness. "Yes, this shidi used to live in a tiny village, so the festivals were very small compared to this."

If Shen Yuan *really* stretches his answer, it is kind of true. Any Mid-Autumn festival he has attended in recent memory has been small, mostly because his parents would rather gather at home instead of taking Shen Yuan to a crowded place where he could contract lingering sicknesses and potentially die if he were unlucky.

The thing that makes him nervous is because he has no clue if Shuang Hu has a noteworthy festival that would make his awe understandable — it would be an issue if his quick-witted shijie saw through Shen Yuan's inconsistencies. How is he supposed to explain that he *is* and *isn't* from that ravaged village?

A hum comes out of Han Lingyu's mouth. "Then it is shidi's luck to see Shuang Hu's Mooncake festival. It is famous throughout Cang Qiong's territory for its scale and excellent cuisine ."

Mentally letting out a sigh of relief as it seems that Han Lingyu did not think anything much of his answer, Shen Yuan tilts his head in curiosity at the other's answer. "Is that so? Then let's eat as many snacks as possible before returning to tasteless chicken stew…."

A chuckle comes out of his shijie's mouth, dispersing the tenseness in her shoulders. "This shijie will make sure to take Shen-shidi to the best snack stalls in town, then."

By the time their conversation is over, Shen Yuan can see the town square mentioned by Han Lingyu, filled with beautiful paper decorations undoubtedly crafted by Qing Jing — the amount of detail and precision is not something achievable for the average craftsman, and from what Shen Yuan has heard, Lord Chen of Shuang Hu often hires Cang Qiong's services.

The sect does have to make money somehow, and it is great to see realistic economics going on instead of the novel's seemingly never-ending coffers filled with spirit stones that materialized themselves into existence because Shen Qingqiu needed to spend them on useless luxuries while Luo Binghe starves.

In fact, Shen Yuan often sees Qian Cao inner disciples going down the mountain to treat whichever lord or young master necessitates their services; he knows Lord Chen frequently calls for them whenever one of his favored concubines falls ill or pregnant, and Shen Yuan absolutely dreads having to deal with Lord Chen anytime in the future. After all, this is the future gross old master surrounded by young concubines that calls for Qing Jing's help when the Skinner Demon strikes Shuang Hu!

Shaking his head slightly, Shen Yuan tries not to focus on such things. After all, he's here to have a good time, filled with good snacks, fun activities and great sightseeing! Shen Yuan is already eyeing the lantern stalls with inquisitive eyes, wondering if it would be too expensive to buy a nicer one to release into the night sky.

If he's going to buy it, then he should do it soon — the festivities are about to start, which means the streets are getting fuller by the second, which in turn means the stalls will be full of slow onlookers. Turning towards Han Lingyu, Shen Yuan is about to let her know of his plans until he sees his shijie looking wide-eyed into the crowd. Following her gaze, Shen Yuan sees an entourage of extremely well-dressed women strolling down the street.

Before Shen Yuan can ask her about it, Han Lingyu speaks without looking at his direction. "There's something this shijie needs to do. I'll be back soon."

Without another word, Han Lingyu walks into the crowd and quickly disappears from Shen Yuan's sight. Letting out a sigh, he knows too well what her sudden departure means — this is as cliché as an unexpected meeting in a romance game can get.

Might as well browse the lanterns before someone arrives, Shen Yuan thinks to himself as he walks towards the closest lantern stall he can find. Perhaps today's encounter will be somewhat normal, considering the setting is a festival; maybe he will meet whichever love interest is here while crossing an empty bridge, or maybe they will catch the handkerchief Shen Yuan would throw if he plays the matchmaking games.

Looking at the vast selection of lanterns, Shen Yuan can't help but feel scammed by the prices. Who the hell would spend half their monthly salary on something like this?! Not that Shen Yuan wouldn't do that if he had his credit card — in fact, he often paid for things he knew were way too expensive compared to their value, just so he could avoid the hassle of looking for another option…

What matters is that Shen Yuan doesn't have his credit card and he doesn't have a steady income either, so his only option is to look for the cheapest option available.

As he looks through countless stalls filled with overpriced lanterns, Shen Yuan is about to give up on his endeavor before he feels a light touch on his shoulder. Turning around, Shen Yuan is met with a random child instead of one of the love interests.

"You're looking for cheaper lanterns, right?" the child asks, to which Shen Yuan enthusiastically nods his head. From the looks of it, this child must be a local with knowledge of where to buy stuff! "My sister makes pretty lanterns, but we couldn't set up a stall, so we're selling them in front of our house. Does mister want to take a look?"

Meeting the young child's eyes and noticing his old-looking clothes, Shen Yuan nods once again, unable to deny those big, bright eyes. "Alright, I'll take a look."

The young boy smiles, happily walking up the street with Shen Yuan following behind. As they make their way through crowds filled with chatting people, both eventually reach a calmer part of town right next to the main street, with the child leading Shen Yuan into an empty alleyway, most of the light coming from the street covered by the townhouses next to them.

Shen Yuan does think it is a bit weird that the kid is taking him somewhere so empty and filled with junk, but maybe his sister is just like him and hates crowds, so she sent her younger siblings to find customers!

Stopping in front of the alleyway entrance, the young boy smiles towards Shen Yuan. “My sister is on the window next to the wooden crates.”

Glancing towards the crates, Shen Yuan notices a few paper lanterns neatly placed near them — great, so this isn’t a scam! They look a bit ragged, but this is the price Shen Yuan has to pay to avoid greedy stall owners. Without thinking twice, he thanks the child and steps into the alleyway.

Four steps in, a strange yet familiar noise echoes through Shen Yuan’s mind, making him immediately stop as his stomach drops. *This is the same noise made by the System when Ji Jue-*

Shen Yuan is abruptly thrown against the stone wall, barely managing to let out a gasp before a cold blade is placed against his throat.

“Hand over all your stuff,” the other person says, effortlessly holding his body against the wall while Shen Yuan curses himself for not leveling up his strength skill. Maybe if he tries to convince the thief he isn’t robbery material… “Open that mouth and I’ll slice your throat before anything gets out!”

As instructed, Shen Yuan’s mouth immediately closes as he feels sweat accumulating on his forehead. The threat of dying isn’t an actual threat to him, but Shen Yuan cannot help but feel nauseous as he remembers what it *feels like.* Besides, dying would do nothing to help him; the System has given him a small timeframe to work with.

It is better to give the robber whatever Shen Yuan has and hope he can earn all that money back somehow. Nodding slowly, his trembling hands reach his pouch and start trying to pry it away from his belt; as the thief is holding the knife right on his carotid artery, Shen Yuan can barely view anything under his chest as he avoids lowering his head in fears of being cut.

“Hurry up!” The thief exclaims with annoyance, which only makes Shen Yuan more nervous, but he nonetheless manages to untie the pouch from his belt.

Handing it over as fast as he can, Shen Yuan can’t help but feel every single beat of his heart as he waits for the thief to let go of him. At this point, he doesn’t care much about his money, or how hard it will be to get it back through tasks; the only thing in Shen Yuan’s mind is that he *needs* to survive this, and after raising his demonic zoology skill, he will immediately start training his strength and cultivation skills.

Finally backing away from Shen Yuan, the robber continues to point his knife towards the other as he pries open the pouch, which is better than having it directly against his throat. Shen Yuan, on the other hand, darts his eyes around the area to see if there’s anything he can use to defend himself — a few planks that are too far for him to reach and a flimsy lantern.

Shen Yuan realizes he is utterly doomed if a fight is to break out. The only thing he can do is dodge and try to hit vital points, but without any strength skill, even his dexterity could prove useless if he cannot withstand a second of fighting against the bigger, bulkier thief in front of him.

As he contemplates screaming frantically while the other is distracted, said thief raises his head in anger to stare at Shen Yuan.

“Is this it?!” the thief scoffs, aggressively throwing the small pouch to the ground. Once again, the knife is pointed straight at his throat. “That stupid kid… Couldn’t even pick a decent one!”

Shen Yuan continues to stare down at the knife, cursing himself a thousand times for following that child. How could he fall for the oldest trick known to man? Would he have to experience that horrible sensation of feeling himself slipping away, of his heart gradually giving up, of his blood growing colder and his mind becoming hazier, all because he was too stupid to recognize a scammer?

It would be better not to fight, Shen Yuan realizes. If this thief is about to kill him for not having enough, it might be less painful than if he were to fight for his life — a slit throat probably kills faster than multiple stabs on his body. Looking at the man in front of him, it becomes clearer that he has killed before; there is no hesitation as he holds the tip of the knife against the other’s throat, not a second thought as blood starts to drip when he firms his grip on the handle.

It doesn’t even shake, which means he must be used to this. Shen Yuan hopes this will mean a faster death.

As Shen Yuan resigns himself to his fate and watches the thief’s knife ready to slide through his throat, a faint silver reflection shines in front of his eyes, heading straight to the thief’s neck. A yelp comes out, and it takes a few seconds for Shen Yuan’s mind to understand what is happening; instead of his body being the one on the floor, Shen Yuan looks down to find the robber lying unconscious, a silver needle sticking out of one of his pressure points so perfectly positioned that it looks like a textbook drawing.

There is no need to look at the familiar fluttering green robes in the corner of his eyes for Shen Yuan to realize who has saved him. As much as he should be thanking Mu Qingfang profusely now, Shen Yuan cannot help but continue standing, frozen in place as his mind tries to recognize the fact he’s not dead and he’s not gravely injured either.

Amongst the confusion and fright rushing through his veins, a faint glimmer of hope washes through Shen Yuan as he realizes he *is* capable of surviving.

Chapter 11: always meet the love interest in a life-or-death situation

Chapter Notes

> hello!! how is everyone doing? sorry for the long wait (once again), uni started again and they gave me a huge project on day 1 😭 however, in compensation for the wait, here is a 7k word chapter full of stuff happening (evil grin)
> anyways, thank u guys so much for keeping up w the fic and i hope u guys enjoy the chapter!! <333
> also, tiny note: sorry for the long time i can take to reply, i swear i read every comment! sometimes fatigue be beating my ass tho and i can't think of anything to say, but i'll always try to answer as many comments as i can!!
> bsky: chiwuri.bsky.social (i changed the username ehehehe)

There is no time left for Shen Yuan to recompose himself before Mu Qingfang hurriedly rushes to his side.

He can tell the Qian Cao Head Disciple is worried, as would be expected; this is the first time they see each other in weeks and Shen Yuan is somehow in his second life-threatening situation witnessed by Mu Qingfang in a span of two months. If not for the lingering fright and daze from the attack, Shen Yuan would have made a joke about it.

"Shen-shidi!" Mu Qingfang exclaims, not sparing a glance towards the unmoving body lying next to the other. "Is shidi hurt anywhere?"

Before Shen Yuan can muster the will to answer, the head disciple has already grabbed his wrist without hesitation, quickly checking for internal issues. From the way Mu Qingfang's shoulders slightly relax after probing his spiritual veins, Shen Yuan assumes nothing much is wrong with him.

Remembering he has not answered yet, Shen Yuan lightly shakes his head. "No, nothing serious, just a scratch…"

Mu Qingfang's gaze snaps upwards, focusing on the thin trail of blood staining the other's throat and collar of his robe. It is noticeable that the head disciple is both worried and frustrated, as he seemingly forgets to keep his expression neutral as usual, allowing his brows to furrow and his eyes to widen slightly as he stares at the injury.

【 Mu Qingfang thinks User should value his health more. Special attribute 'Care' increased to 11%. +10 Affection Points. 】

Quickly grabbing a piece of cloth with a strong herbal scent and some wetness, Mu Qingfang presses the cloth delicately against the other's skin and smoothly cleans the wound, then grabbing some gauze to cover it. For a brief second, Shen Yuan wonders where the Qian Cao Head Disciple carries all these medical supplies until he remembers the existence of Qiankun pouches.

"It seems the dagger has not cut anything further than the skin," Mu Qingfang says after a small sigh of relief. "Still, shidi should remember to clean his wound for a few days to prevent any infections."

Shen Yuan absentmindedly nods, already used to the usual 'doctor's speech' about wound hygiene and whatnot; honestly, he's more worried about the elephant in the room which is the unconscious robber.

At first, Shen Yuan had barely noticed the body lying down on the cold ground, completely unmoving and almost blending with the dark shadows cast on the alleyway. However, now that he has, he cannot help but anxiously wonder if he just witnessed Mu Qingfang murdering someone.

Unable to keep his worries to himself, Shen Yuan quietly speaks up while looking at the body. "…Is he alive?"

Seemingly surprised by the answer, Mu Qingfang takes a few seconds longer than expected to answer. "Yes, this shixiong has merely knocked him unconscious. Until the needle is removed, his body will continue to be in such a state."

A wave of relief washes over Shen Yuan's body. While he knows things work differently in historical cultivation settings, he cannot help but shudder at the thought of killing someone or causing anyone's death — hell, he's not sure if he's ever seen a dead body before.

As if to calm the other a bit, Mu Qingfang lowers his body and reaches for the robber's wrist, checking for vitals and nodding after a few seconds. Shen Yuan feels his mind calming down a bit with the information— at least he won't have to deal with the weight of a death.

"Good,"Shen Yuan breathes out in relief. "Do we alert the city guards…?"

"Do not worry about it," Mu Qingfang replies, taking a talisman from his pouch and writing something with his finger. Then, after writing, he applies some qi and the talisman quickly disintegrates. "Someone else will take care of it."

Nodding to the statement, Shen Yuan pities whichever inner disciple was unfortunate enough to get Mu Qingfang's message talisman. Averting his sight from the unconscious robber, Shen Yuan is suddenly hit by a wave of tiredness, his muscles finally relaxing as his heartbeat stabilizes — oh, how he hates the aftermath of an adrenaline rush.

The shift in his stance is quickly noticed by the Qian Cao Head Disciple. "Does Shen-shidi wish to sit somewhere and rest for a while?"

Heavens bless Mu Qingfang's social awareness skills, Shen Yuan thinks. "Yes, I'd like to do that…"

The head disciple nods to the reply, and both start making their way outside the alleyway, with Mu Qingfang leading the way. As they step into the street, a familiar notification sound echoes through Shen Yuan's ears.

【 New achievement unlocked! — 'Beggars can't be choosers': have a thief complain about your lack of money. Reward: +5% minor task reward. 】

Shen Yuan wishes he could scream out of anger. The System cannot miss a single opportunity to make his day worse, can it?

【 (〃＞ ᴗ ＜〃) 】

Deciding to ignore the infuriating System to preserve his own mental wellbeing, Shen Yuan tries to focus on the surrounding area instead, walking alongside Mu Qingfang as they try to navigate the bustling street. It feels refreshing to leave the dark, damp place behind, even if the street they walk into is awfully crowded and loud.

From the way he confidently moves, Mu Qingfang must be acquainted with the streets of Shuang Hu. It makes sense, Shen Yuan thinks; the head disciple must have been to the city multiple times ever since entering the sect. Being the closest to an actual town near Cang Qiong, it is common for disciples to come down the mountain to buy personal supplies and items.

Shen Yuan isn't sure where the head disciple plans to go, but if they keep going through the crowd as they do, there's a chance they will be separated. Shen Yuan really wants to avoid another dangerous that might cost him his life, so somewhat instinctively he does what he's used to doing whenever going to a crowded place with his family — he grabs the person's hand tightly and doesn't let go.

Mu Qingfang's steps falter for a second before a notification from the System emerges in front of Shen Yuan.

【 Mu Qingfang thinks User's hands are soft. +15 Affection Points added to 'Qian Cao's Head Disciple, Mu Qingfang'. 】

Neither of them say anything about the sudden action. By the time Shen Yuan actually realizes what he's done, he knows it's too late; the only thing he can do is bear the shame and his awfully thin face quietly, and hope they arrive at whichever place they're walking towards fast.

The System doesn't need to try, Shen Yuan is doing the job in its place — how could he naturally act in such a cliché way?! This has worked solely because they are inside a romantic game, because his hand would've undoubtedly been slapped away if he ever attempted anything like this in real life!

Eventually, the crowd disperses a bit and they arrive at a riverside walkway, oddly calm considering how full the street just next to it is. Shen Yuan is amazed that such a place had been near them all this time — they have walked two blocks to reach it, and the shift in atmosphere is quite dramatic for a place so close to the bustling festival.

Picking a random bench from the available ones, Shen Yuan lets go of Mu Qingfang's hand and sits down, face burning with embarrassment as he wonders if he should apologize for the sudden action.

"…Apologies for holding shixiong's hand without asking, I was afraid of getting lost in the crowd," Shen Yuan awkwardly says, not daring to look at the other in the eye. Better to apologize now and hope Mu Qingfang didn't mind it that much.

Smiling calmly, the head disciple shakes his head. "It is no issue. The streets were more crowded than this shixiong anticipated."

Once again, the awkward silence Shen Yuan fervently hates is back. Honestly, he's not sure what to say, and he's too tired to come up with something — he has been through a considerably stressful situation just now, after all.

Thankfully — or not, depending on the angle —, a topic of conversation naturally arises as Shen Yuan feels a strange coolness on his back and shoulder, which should have been warm as he is using his outer robe. Turning his head to look at it, Shen Yuan barely manages to keep the upcoming curse from leaving his mouth.

His only coat now has a huge gash on it!

"No way," he mutters, furrowing his brows in both annoyance and stress as he wonders how to stitch it back together. Shen Yuan takes the outer robe away, taking a closer look at the damaged fabric to see if there's any chance of saving his ugly, old coat.

Shen Yuan doesn't have enough money left to buy another one and have some leftover cash, so he lets out a sigh of annoyance and decides to not wear it today, for fear of it ripping apart even more before he can stitch it back together. It's better to be cold for a single night than for the foreseeable winter days approaching…

"Does shidi have any other coat inside his pouch to wear?" Mu Qingfang asks, to which Shen Yuan shakes his head before freezing and realizing he didn't grab his pouch.

"…Oh Heavens, I think I left the pouch there-!" Shen Yuan exclaims as he rises up from the bench, talking more to himself than the head disciple right in front of him.

Before Shen Yuan can go running back to the alleyway before anyone else tries to steal his hard-earned money, Mu Qingfang pulls something from his own pouch. Shen Yuan sighs in relief at the sight of his worn-out and tattered qiankun pouch, picking it and bowing in gratitude towards the head disciple — which also helps hide his face burning up in embarrassment.

“Thanking shixiong for keeping the pouch,” Shen Yuan says, trying not to show his embarrassment through his voice as best as he can. “Also, thanking shixiong for helping this shidi…”

Mu Qingfang smiles, shaking his head lightly. “There is no need to thank this shixiong. How could I not help Shen-shidi?”

Yeah, It’d be weird if he was there and didn’t do anything, Shen Yuan thinks to himself as he thanks the head disciple once again. Still, he’s so glad Mu Qingfang happened to be there, System intervention or not; Shen Yuan hasn’t died because of his quick action. At least it didn’t turn into a situation like Ji Jue’s qi deviation.

This has proved something to him; the checkpoints are survivable, as long as Shen Yuan manages to hold on long enough. It is difficult to describe in words how much Shen Yuan is relieved he does not have to die whenever the System decides to throw a random dangerous situation in his face — he just needs to manage the situation well enough to avoid going through the horror of dying again.

Mu Qingfang speaks up again, interrupting Shen Yuan’s thoughts. “It would be ideal for shidi to wear his coat, even if it is damaged. It is a bit cold now…”

Shen Yuan almost forgot how concerned Mu Qingfang gets with any mildly unhealthy behaviors. It is somewhat expected of the future best physician of the realm, but it doesn’t mean it isn’t a little awkward to deal with — Shen Yuan isn’t the only person with unhealthy habits, so why is he the only one who gets called out on it?

The answer is quite obvious; Shen Yuan is the protagonist and Mu Qingfang is the love interest who happens to be a doctor, but still, it doesn’t make him feel any better about it.

“If I wear it now, there is a chance it will rip beyond repair, and I can’t risk that as it is my only coat,” Shen Yuan sighs, throwing the tattered apparel inside his pouch. “It is alright, though. This shidi isn’t feeling cold-”

As if ripping a scene off from a cheesy drama scene, Shen Yuan barely contains his yelp as he feels a warm, heavy fabric envelop his body. Looking up, he finds a long white cloak being carefully wrapped around him, the soft fur brushing against his neck in a comfortable manner. Mu Qingfang adjusts the cloak slightly before tying a ribbon to keep it in place.

Where the hell did he get that from????? Shen Yuan asks himself, somewhat bewildered by the situation.

It must have been inside the head disciple’s pouch, yes, but how did he grab it so fast that Shen Yuan couldn’t even argue against it?! Now he’s already wearing it and feeling comfy with the expensive material, how is he supposed to refuse this strange action now? Even worse, it feels like Shen Yuan’s face is about to explode from how warm it feels!

While thinking of a reply before his brain short-circuits, Shen Yuan’s eyes meet Mu Qingfang’s gaze. Another System notification beeps through the quiet street.

【 Mu Qingfang thinks the cloak looks great on User. +15 Affection Points added to 'Qian Cao's Head Disciple, Mu Qingfang'. 】

【 Mu Qingfang's Affection Level is now 'Growing Endearment'. Current Affection Points: 110. New interactions and quests unlocked! 】

It is difficult to keep Shen Yuan's expression in check as he reads the System's notification; honestly, the concept of raising his affection level with any of the love interests seemed so difficult and far from his reach that Shen Yuan had thought little of the matter — and today, he has reached this monumental milestone.

It is the first of another 3 levels he must reach, but it is no less of a milestone for that. Shen Yuan's hard work is paying off, slowly but surely; soon enough, he will be able to start Mu Qingfang's route and rush through it as much as humanly possible.

Mu Qingfang seems to be the best available option at the time. Shen Yuan is curious about the other routes, sure, but he can look that up when he goes back home; he doesn't want the potential conflicts the other routes could bring. Mu Qingfang doesn't have any enemies, nor does he have a bad reputation in the sect — everyone likes him enough to not bother him.

Isn't this the definition of a drama-free route?

Of course, there will likely be *some* drama down the line — a story needs it to be entertaining, and unfortunately, anything can happen when it comes to Airplane. However, Mu Qingfang's peaceful nature and agreeable personality does make things infinitely easy for Shen Yuan, in contrast of the mess that would be dealing with Yue Qingyuan or Liu Qingge's route — and he's not even going to mention the other two elephants in the room.

So, the choice is obvious; Shen Yuan will follow Mu Qingfang's route, no matter the amount of dog-blood clichés he is fated to encounter along the way, mildly homoerotic cloak tying included.

Back to the current situation, Shen Yuan briefly wonders if he should return the cloak. It is comfortable, yes, but he's somewhat uncomfortable that he's wearing someone else's clothing, and he's even more uncomfortable with the fact that it must cost way more than he can afford right now — what if he accidentally dirties or damages it?

The head disciple preemptively answers as he finishes tying the ribbons together. "This is a spare cloak I pack in case of an emergency. Shen-shidi needn't worry about leaving this shixiong without a coat."

Hesitantly, Shen Yuan nods his head to the information. "Still, I'll make sure to return it to shixiong when we get back to Qian Cao…"

"No need to worry, it does not fit me," Mu Qingfang replies, and Shen Yuan can immediately tell he's lying. This cloak is so much larger than Shen Yuan that it almost touches the ground, how can it not fit Mu Qingfang! "In any case, we can talk about that later."

Quietly sighing, Shen Yuan abandons the subject and sits down on the wooden bench. He's still tired, which is comprehensible considering what he went through, but at the same time, how can he not get upset about his day going so differently from what he imagined?

At least this stressful situation has given Shen Yuan some much needed insight into the System's mechanics. First, an unavoidable death is not mandatory for a checkpoint to activate; Shen Yuan can survive if he manages the situation correctly. The timing between the checkpoint and the actual threat is very narrow, so if anything were to happen and Shen Yuan knows he will have to go back, he will have to figure out what to do while he dies.

Once back in Qian Cao, Shen Yuan will ask a few questions to make sure he has most bases covered regarding the checkpoint system. The System has answered a few of his doubts before, so maybe it will do the same if he calls it again.

Sighing to himself, Shen Yuan is pretty certain he's too tired to deal with bustling crowds and loud chatter everywhere.

"Does shidi want to return to Qian Cao?" Mu Qingfang asks, worried about the tired expression on the other's face.

"Perhaps soon," Shen Yuan replies, trying to not show how frustrated he is that he had to get mugged right when there's a festival he wanted to explore. "It's my first time in Shuang Hu's Mooncake Festival, so I wanted to release a lantern, but I guess I can wait until next year…."

Mu Qingfang thinks for a moment before answering. "…Then, what about waiting a bit before returning to Qian Cao? The lanterns will be released soon, so Shen-shidi should see them before leaving."

While it isn't what Shen Yuan had first envisioned, it is better than leaving without doing anything of note. Noticing the increased amount of people gathering around the riverside and the bridge with colorful paper lanterns in their hands, Shen Yuan nods in agreement to the proposal.

Even if he cannot do everything he has envisioned to, Shen Yuan knows there will be more festivals to enjoy — it is quite obvious to him that he will spend a few more months stuck here, so why not attend all the festivals he can? Next time, Shen Yuan will absolutely not follow children selling dubiously cheap products in dark alleyways.

Mu Qingfang smiles at the other's answer, then excuses himself as he says there are a few issues he must deal with, but that he should be back quickly. Shen Yuan doesn't think much of it; after all, Mu Qingfang probably already had something to do in Shuang Hu before meeting Shen Yuan.

Honestly, he cannot picture the head disciple coming to the festival for entertainment purposes — maybe it's because he never saw Mu Qingfang doing anything outside of his head disciple duties… Suddenly, Shen Yuan finds himself somewhat pitying the Qian Cao Head Disciple. Maybe Shen Yuan could ask him what he likes to do in his free time…

Trying to kill some time before the head disciple returns, Shen Yuan decides to look around the place — without leaving the bench, since he's too tired and lazy to attempt to go nearer the crowds of people a few meters away from him. So, Shen Yuan looks at the countless people celebrating the festivities, laughing heartily and scribbling on their lanterns with their loved ones.

Perhaps it is the stressful situations he endured just now, or maybe he's feeling more emotional than normal, but Shen Yuan feels a little sting in his heart as he gazes towards the gleeful scene in front of him.

If not for the lack of his family, Shen Yuan wouldn't mind being here as much. Perhaps, if the System had simply told him he is dead in his world, then Shen Yuan would have adapted to his life here — but how can he do so when the chance to return to the life he's always known is at the tip of his fingers?

His family must be waiting for him. How can Shen Yuan ignore this and continue life as usual? As much as he enjoys the life he is leading here, the healthy body full of energy, the relationships he has built, Shen Yuan knows he cannot have the best of both worlds — literally. At some point, he will have to return home, far away from this game that is just as alive as the world he knows.

Why get attached to something that will eventually disappear?

Shaking his head, Shen Yuan tries to get rid of the sad thoughts. It won't help him, after all — what he needs to do right now is to focus and figure out how to romance the Qian Cao Head Disciple as effectively as possible.

As if on cue, Mu Qingfang's figure appears at the intersection between the riverside street and the main street, quickly walking back towards Shen Yuan with two circular objects in his hands. Shen Yuan doesn't need to look to know what it is; he can only sigh at his own stupidity for not predicting this obvious romantic plot that could be seen coming from a mile away.

"It would be a shame for shidi to not release a lantern during his first visit to the festival," the head disciple says, handing over one of the circular paper lanterns to the other, who sheepishly accepts it.

If the Qian Cao Head Disciple is already acting so comfortably in the first relationship level, Shen Yuan can only wonder what sorts of absurd dog-blood plots will come up later. Will it be the same for every other male lead?

Regardless of Shen Yuan's awkwardness, he takes the lantern and examines it for a moment, impressed by the intricate drawings on the thin paper. "It's beautiful… Thanking shixiong for the gift."

"Would shidi like to release it next to the river?" Mu Qingfang asks, to which Shen Yuan nods.

As they approach the water, Shen Yuan tries to come up with a decent wish. Should he go with the simplest route and wish for good fortune and prosperity for his family? Should he wish to return home as soon as possible? Shen Yuan isn't sure how many Mooncake Festivals he will be able to attend in this world; this might be his last, for all he knows. Perhaps he should wish for something more symbolic, then…

Quickly glancing towards Mu Qingfang, Shen Yuan notices he is deep in thought, most likely wondering what to wish as well. Perhaps it is because of the kindness shown to him before, but Shen Yuan can't help but let out a little smile as he watches the head disciple.

Shen Yuan doesn't want to admit it, but he likes the life he leads here, even with the awful System and the constant grind he's forced to endure. Did he ever feel so alive when lying down lethargically, waiting for his death with no one but himself and his cellphone to entertain him until he kicked the bucket?

If he suddenly returned right now, Shen Yuan would have already lived more in these months than he has in his whole life.

If only his family was here, Shen Yuan would gladly stay. However, it is not only impossible but also unfair to his family, who have built their whole lives and connections back in his world. It feels wrong for Shen Yuan to wish for his family to be here with him, so he tries to come up with something once again.

Closing his eyes, Shen Yuan smiles as he comes up with a wish. Not the most creative, but sincere enough that it makes Shen Yuan want to whisper it to the stars in case they listen.

Glancing for a moment towards the Qian Cao Head Disciple, he notices the other has finished thinking about his wish, and Shen Yuan nods once Mu Qingfang stares back. Worthy of an otome game, both raise their lanterns and release them in synchrony, watching the warm lights slowly fly upwards.

May I see my family again and share this happiness with them.

Shen Yuan's frantic study sessions continue as usual after the Mooncake Festival.

It has been 10 days since, and Shen Yuan has managed to raise his demonic zoology skill to 97% — and he has 11 days left until the deadline! With the rhythm he's been able to keep, Shen Yuan should be finished with all this in about six days.

Shortly after Shen Yuan released his lantern, Han Lingyu ended up running into him and Mu Qingfang. She was apologetic for leaving him alone for so long, but seemed to feel calmer as she realized the head disciple was there too. Since his shijie was already looking quite guilty, Shen Yuan ended up omitting some important information and told her he and Mu Qingfang happened to meet by chance.

Well, he didn't *exactly* lie, and Mu Qingfang didn't say anything to correct him either.

Han Lingyu and Shen Yuan returned to Qian Cao soon after, since the Qian Cao Head Disciple told them he had some business to deal with in Shuang Hu. It was only at the entrance of Cang Qiong that Shen Yuan realized he had not returned the coat to Mu Qingfang, to which he vowed to do whenever he saw the head disciple again.

Ironically enough, Shen Yuan hasn't seen Mu Qingfang since the festival, and worse yet, when he finally decided to mend the ripped fabric after waking up, Shen Yuan discovered his trusty old coat had disappeared from his storage basket!

You've got to be shitting me, Shen Yuan cries to himself as he stares incredulously at the empty basket.

What is he supposed to do now? He has barely been able to withstand the cold without any extra outer layers, and it's not even winter yet! Cang Qiong is a very cold place to live in, considering it is on top of a mountain — there's no way he can go on without any coat or cloak.

Maybe the System has something I can buy from the store, Shen Yuan thinks with a shimmer of hope in his heart. So, praying his wallet will have enough to cover the bill, he calls out. "System, are there any coats on the shop?"

【 Loading System Item Shop… 】

The familiar bright screen pops up in front of Shen Yuan, soon displaying a catalog that is clearly a Taobao knockoff.

A few cloaks appear, most with outlandish titles, prices and bonuses; while it would be cool to have a cloak that adds some shield points to himself, Shen Yuan unfortunately lacks the funds for it, so he continues browsing in search of the simplest cotton coat he can find.

Once Shen Yuan's eyes settle on the bland, unremarkable cloak he has been looking for, it takes all of his will not to screech at the price displayed.

"700 R-Points?!" Shen Yuan cries, baffled by the System's shamelessness. "This is a scam!"

【 This System guarantees all Shop items are legitimate and ethically sourced! 】

...Whatever that means, Shen Yuan thinks to himself as he shudders and tries to bury the annoyance slowly boiling inside of him. He still has a whole freezing cold day ahead of him, and dealing with the System is like trying to communicate with a wall.

Shen Yuan spends a few extra minutes looking for his old coat, just to make sure. As he thought, it has completely vanished — this is either the System fucking with him for otome plot convenience, or there's a weirdo stealing clothes around Qian Cao, which Shen Yuan sincerely hopes isn't the case.

Sighing, Shen Yuan grabs the fancy fur-lined cloak neatly stored inside his wardrobe. It seems like Mu Qingfang's coat will have to do the job for today…

After dealing with his only class of the day, Shen Yuan is impressed that no one has asked him about the cloak clearly not bought by himself — considering how much Qian Cao disciples love some gossip, he'd assumed his shijies would be running to find out how Shen Yuan got it.

His happiness does not last forever, of course. As soon as Shen Yuan steps foot into the dining hall and settles down with his bowl of mild seasoned stew, a familiar face sits on the vacant chair in front of him.

"Shidi," Wang Haoran greets with a cheery tone, his eyes already set on the white fur coat. "What a nice cloak. Did shidi buy it at the same place as dashixiong?"

Unable to avoid the utter shock after hearing the other, Shen Yuan barely manages to avoid choking on his food. Trying to recompose himself and save face, Shen Yuan feigns ignorance. "…What does Wang-shixiong mean by this?"

His poor acting does not work on his seasoned gossiper of a shixiong, to Shen Yuan's despair. Wang Haoran stares back with an unimpressed expression, as if expecting the other's reaction. "You know exactly what I mean, shidi. Are you and dashixiong already…."

"What are you trying to imply?!" Shen Yuan embarrassedly replies in a low tone, cutting his shixiong mid question in fear Wang Haoran will scream it as loudly as possible for the whole peak to hear. "There's nothing going on between us!"

"Aiya, why is shidi so stressed? I was merely asking if you and Mu-dashixiong became friends," Wang Haoran replies, fake innocence dripping from his voice as Shen Yuan wonders if he would get in trouble for slapping his shixiong on the head. "Such good friends to the point Mu-shixiong has given you his clothes, no less!"

"…Mu-shixiong was just being considerate," Shen Yuan replies, hoping from the bottom of his heart that no one will hear what his shixiong is saying and spread it all over the sect. "My cloak was damaged and he happened to have a spare one."

"Yeah, and Qian Cao's food is the best of all peaks," his shixiong replies sarcastically, causing Shen Yuan to sigh in defeat. "Does shidi genuinely think Mu-shixiong would give away cloaks to every disciple who needs one? He would just direct us to the warehouse to request another!"

"Still, there's nothing going on between us," Shen Yuan says, hoping his face isn't too red because of the embarrassment.

Raising an eyebrow, Wang Haoran takes a few seconds to answer, probably wondering whether it would be worth it to question Shen Yuan further. "…If shidi says so."

Letting out a mental sigh of relief, Shen Yuan quickly diverts the conversation away from that uncomfortable topic. Wang Haoran can be quite pushy at times, but he's a great conversationalist — and a great person to learn the latest gossip going around the peaks. After a few minutes of idle conversation about random peak events and disciple infighting, an unexpected subject peaks Shen Yuan's interest.

“I’ve heard the preparations for this year’s Immortal Alliance Conference are in full swing,” Wang Haoran shares, eating his bowl of stew without hurry. “I’ve only helped with some logistics regarding the medicine inventory, but Jia-shijie had to attend a few inter-peak meetings and she told me it’s a real mess…”

“Cang Qiong is hosting the conference this year?” Shen Yuan surprisedly asks, unaware that there would even be an Immortal Alliance Conference soon, much less that his sect would be hosting it.

“Sometimes this shixiong forgets Shen-shidi hasn’t been here for long,” the other says and laughs. “Yes, this year’s conference will be hosted by Cang Qiong in… About three months, I think?”

“In the middle of winter?” Shen Yuan asks, baffled by the decision. “Wouldn’t that be a bit impractical?”

“Surprisingly no, as the conference will be held in Ya’an,” Wang Haoran replies. Shen Yuan has no clue where this place is, and he’s hesitant to ask. “It’s not exactly *warm* during winter, but it is much better than any nearby place.”

Nodding, Shen Yuan keeps a mental note on the place’s name so he can look it up on a map later, and hopefully get some info on the flora and fauna of the area; Shen Yuan is 99% sure the plot will find a way to take him there, even if he’s a nobody and has no fighting skills at the moment.

“Will Wang-shixiong attend?” Shen Yuan asks, to which Wang Haoran nods his head enthusiastically.

“Without a doubt,” his shixiong replies. “As shidi must know, most Inner Disciples apply to attend… Ah, it would be nice if shidi was already an Inner Disciple, then we could attend together.”

【 Main Quest unlocked! Attend the Immortal Alliance Conference. Requirements: Reach ‘Inner Disciple’ rank, reach ‘Early-stage Core Formation’. Time remaining: 92 days, 10 hours and 51 minutes. Failure to complete will cause the punishment protocol to be activated. 】

Another obligatory mission, Shen Yuan nervously thinks to himself. Reaching Inner Disciple rank won’t be hard, as he is almost done with it, but reaching early-stage core formation could be a completely different story — one that would be easier to figure out if Airplane had bothered to explain the cultivation system of this world! Alas, Shen Yuan will have to figure out how to jump from middle-stage foundation establishment to early-stage core formation in three months.

“It would be nice,” Shen Yuan replies after a moment of hesitation, relieved that his voice doesn’t show the bubbling nervousness in his mind. “Maybe this shidi will get lucky and be promoted soon!”

“Let us hope shizun is in a good mood during your evaluation,” Wang Haoran jokingly says, laughing for a bit before his attention is brought to his qiankun pouch.

Shen Yuan quietly finishes his bowl and observes Wang Haoran as he takes out a talisman from his pouch. From what Shen Yuan knows of them, it looks like it might be a communication talisman — just like the one Mu Qingfang carries around, which must be assigned to Qian Cao Inner Disciples.

A sigh comes out of his shixiong’s mouth as the talisman disintegrates. Shen Yuan lets his curiosity get the best of him. “Did something happen?”

“Hallmaster Chen is asking me to help him with his research,” Wang Haoran sighs with a tired expression. “How am I supposed to deliver the report with him bossing me around all afternoon…?”

Wang Haoran’s eyes meet Shen Yuan’s, and he immediately widens them in realization. Shen Yuan can’t say he doesn’t know what is coming — honestly, it’s been quite a while since he has met any love interests, so it was a matter of time before someone pulled this ancient trick on him.

“Shidi…” his shixiong whines, looking at the other with what must be Wang Haoran’s attempt at puppy eyes. “Can shidi deliver this report to Yue-shixiong? You’ve already met him, I promise it will be quick and this shixiong will give shidi a few candies brought from Shuang Hu!”

As expected, a System notification appears in front of Shen Yuan as soon as Wang Haoran finishes speaking.

【 New Quest! Deliver a report to Yue Qingyuan in Wang Haoran’s place. Reward: 200 R-Points, 20 Reputation Points, batch of candies. Does User wish to accept the quest? 】

Immediately nodding as he reads the rewards — especially the candies! —, Shen Yuan sweetly smiles towards the other. “Of course this shidi can help shixiong!”

“Shen-shidi is the most trustworthy and reliable person in Qian Cao,” Wang Haoran sings his praises, which Shen Yuan shamelessly accepts. “Here is the report, shidi should deliver it before this shichen ends!”

Throwing the scroll towards Shen Yuan, Wang Haoran hurries out of the dining hall without finishing his meal. Shen Yuan, already used to his martial sibling’s dramatic exits whenever giving him a task, pays no mind to the commotion and quietly puts away the leftover bowls before also leaving the dining hall.

Qiong Ding is a bit colder than other peaks due to its height, and for all that Shen Yuan wanted to avoid it, he relented and took the Qian Cao Head Disciple’s coat with him — and as much as he hates to admit it, Shen Yuan is really glad he has this coat at the moment, as it keeps him warm even against the frigid wind blowing through the mountain range.

It's not like Shen Yuan has any classes or shifts during the afternoon, so he has no reason to rush as he strolls down the rainbow bridge and up Qiong Ding's stairs, especially since he's warm and comfortable with the expensive coat. Shen Yuan was planning to study after lunch, but since this golden opportunity to earn R-Points and some sugary foods has arisen, why wouldn't he take it?

As he is now growing somewhat used to, many stares follow Shen Yuan as he tries to figure out where Yue Qingyuan's office might be located. It is still embarrassing, without a doubt, especially after remembering how his last public appearance in Qiong Ding went — honestly, Shen Yuan's face grows a little warm just recalling that terribly cheesy moment.

Upon reaching the main Qiong Ding building, Shen Yuan looks around the entrance for a while, wondering if he should ask anyone for directions — he knows this must be the building, but it is so huge that it is impossible for him to find a single office in this huge pavilion.

Of course, Shen Yuan doesn't get the chance to do that before he accidentally stumbles upon the exact person he's looking for.

"Shen-shidi," Yue Qingyuan exclaims once he notices the other, visibly surprised over Shen Yuan's presence. "It has been a while. Is shidi looking for something?"

"Yue-shixiong," Shen Yuan greets back with a head bow. "Actually, this shidi has been sent to deliver something to shixiong."

Humming in understanding, Yue Qingyuan smiles softly. "Is that so? Then, this shixiong will have to bother shidi to follow me to my office."

Shen Yuan quickly nods and starts following the head disciple, trying his best to ignore the odd stares and whispers that come with walking alongside Yue Qingyuan — of course Qiong Ding disciples vividly remember what happened a few weeks ago! Thankfully, the walk to the office is fairly short, so Shen Yuan doesn't have to contend with the embarrassing looks and silence for long.

Once they arrive in front of a tall door, Yue Qingyuan opens it and guides Shen Yuan inside. His office is as beautiful as would be expected of a future sect leader — carefully placed furniture, subtle yet elegant decorations and many shelves filled with scrolls and countless books. At the same time it feels pretty, it also gives a feeling of grandeur, matching Qiong Ding's magnificent architectural style that screams 'authority'.

"Shidi may sit there," the Qiong Ding Head Disciple points to a low table near the window. "Would shidi like some tea?"

Knowing he is in no rush, Shen Yuan smiles and nods, quietly making his way to the seat as Yue Qingyuan fetches the tea. Upon sitting down, the first thing Shen Yuan notices is how comfortable the pillow is; the privileges of being a future sect leader, for sure. The glistening porcelain tea set in front of Shen Yuan must be worth more than everything he has on his person now, Mu Qingfang's cloak included.

Shen Yuan takes his time admiring the tea set's beautiful artwork depicting scenes from classic folklore tales, to the point he almost fails to see Yue Qingyuan when the other finally arrives with the teapot.

"It shall be ready in a few minutes," Yue Qingyuan says as he sits and sets down the teapot. "Has shidi's ankle healed?"

It takes a few seconds for Shen Yuan to realize what exactly Yue Qingyuan is referring to — mostly because his ankle got better after a day of rest, so he did not think about it too much —, and upon remembering the whole situation, Shen Yuan cannot help the redness spreading through his face.

"Yes, it is healed," Shen Yuan replies, cursing himself for this otome protagonist blushing debuff (or buff, depending on how you look at it). Suddenly, Shen Yuan remembered one of the first tasks he willingly took, and decided to attempt to fish some information. "Has Yue-shixiong felt well recently? This shidi remembers shixiong looked a bit unwell the first time we met…"

"It is nothing serious," Yue Qingyuan quickly replies, as if it is a rehearsed answer. For a few seconds, Shen Yuan thinks he won't be able to find anything out before the head disciple surprisingly continues to speak. "It is merely the remnants of an old injury. Jiang-shishu occasionally takes a closer look to make sure everything is alright."

Nodding as the Qiong Ding Head Disciple finishes, Shen Yuan makes sure to remember this information. From the way Yue Qingyuan avoids talking about it, it must have been something bigger than he's letting show; what kind of injury would require the Qian Cao Peak Lord, literally the best doctor in this realm, to look after it after however long it has 'healed'?

Shen Yuan decides to not ask further at the moment. Maybe it would be better to ask more after he reaches level 2 with Yue Qingyuan. "This shidi understands. If Yue-shixiong ever needs help, I may not be nearly as skilled as Shizun or Mu-shixiong, but I can deal with small issues…!"

A small, genuine smile blossoms on the Qiong Ding Head Disciple's face.

【 Yue Qingyuan is thankful for User's kind gesture. Special Attribute 'Comfort' increased to 7%. +15 Affection Points. 】

"This shixiong shall remember it," Yue Qingyuan replies as he continues to smile. The head disciple takes a look at the teapot before continuing to speak. "It seems like the tea is ready."

Yue Qingyuan raises the teapot to pour it onto Shen Yuan's cup, which he does as perfectly as would be expected of the head disciple. A fragrant aroma rises from the steam, much different from the usual tea served at Qian Cao — being rich really is a life-changer when you're in a world without modern ultraprocessed food…

Muttering a small thanks to the head disciple, Shen Yuan carefully picks up the cup worth more than his soul and takes a gulp of the fragrant tea, appreciating every bit of flavor offered

by Qiong Ding's rich selections as Yue Qingyuan fills his own cup. The steam is warm and comfortable against his face, making Shen Yuan's expression soften as he raises the cup once again.

That dreaded noise Shen Yuan had heard just a few days ago once again echoes on his mind.

Gulping the tea already in his mouth, Shen Yuan coughs out of surprise and fear, his body tensing up as badly as it had when he had been cornered by the robber. With his body paralyzed with fright and the cup hanging midway towards the table, Shen Yuan desperately tries to think. What exactly is dangerous enough in Yue Qingyuan's office to prompt a checkpoint so suddenly…

Looking down at his own reflection in the cup, Shen Yuan is struck with the realization later than he wishes.

"Shixiong, don't drink-" Shen Yuan frantically exclaims, stopping mid sentence as a sharp pain unlike any he has experienced spreads through his stomach.

Dropping his cup as his grip starts to weaken, Shen Yuan is left with no time to mourn the expensive porcelain cup before he is forced to hold his hand against the floor in order not to fall backwards, curving himself and crying out as the pain seems to radiate from his throat to his belly. A cough erupts from his mouth, alongside an amount of blood that Shen Yuan knows cannot mean anything but what he is thinking.

A shattering noise and a desperate cry echo through the room. "Shen-shidi!"

At some point, Shen Yuan falls on the ground, although he is not aware how. If being stabbed felt like having your insides torn apart, then being poisoned feels like having your insides being melted by acid, slowly corroding the surrounding area and causing the body to collapse almost instantaneously.

He knows Yue Qingyuan is in front of him, saying something, yet the only thing Shen Yuan can hear is the sound of his own heartbeat pounding against his ears like a drum. Every cough feels as if his lungs will rip away from his chest, every breath feels like there's nothing but burning smoke entering through his nostrils. Even in his pain-riddled state, Shen Yuan knows very well the only way this can end.

Slowly closing his eyes, Shen Yuan quietly drifts into the mercy granted by death.

Chapter 12: do NOT drink the deadly harem tea blend

Chapter Notes

> hello!! how r u guys doing? i know, this took like forever (i'm actually shocked its been a few months wtf), but i fear i was stuck with the most annoying creative block on earth like this was sitting in my docs at like 4,5k words for at least 3 months… well at least i managed to finish it now that i have a bunch of uni assignments instead of during my vacation!!!!!!!! fuck them assignments!!!!!
> also, once again i have missed a lot of comments, and i'm very sorry for it 😭 i lowkey saw the inbox increasing and my brain was like. i will answer later. and then i had 80 inbox notifications so this time ill answer everyday after i wake up (promise)
> anyways, hope u guys enjoy another chapter of sy suffering!!!
> bsky: shiyooji.bsky.social and also i have a tumblr (shiyooji) where i post my drawings!

Returning to the checkpoint gives Shen Yuan no relief nor time.

There's no time left for Shen Yuan to consider the remnants of his demise, the pain of bleeding out and suffocating at the same time — Shen Yuan knows he has already taken a sip of the poisoned tea before the checkpoint was activated, and another gulp rests calmly in his mouth, waiting for it to wash away to his intestines to corrode them; the only thing he can do now is quickly spit out the rest and pray it is enough to save his life.

Letting it all out without care for the head disciple sitting across from him, Shen Yuan's heart pounds frantically as he coughs out every single drop he can manage, the expensive cup falling from his hands as he does so. He can feel the first sip going down his esophagus, slipping away from Shen Yuan's control as his brain tries to come up with what to do.

"Shidi?" Yue Qingyuan calls out with a careful and worried tone to his voice.

Agitated eyes lock into the other's confused stare as Shen Yuan's mouth starts speaking without him noticing. "There's something wrong with the tea-!"

Before Shen Yuan can attempt to throw up whatever he has already drunk, a sudden pain starts radiating from his abdomen. It is less intense than before, but not by much; it is still enough to make Shen Yuan's face pale and sweat start forming in his temple as he grips his stomach with one hand and tries to steady himself with another, trying to contain the agonizing groans coming out from his mouth.

Yue Qingyuan is quick to react, immediately moving to Shen Yuan's side and checking his qi. From the look in the head disciple's face and the sharp pain that doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon, Shen Yuan can guess the situation is not good. Nevertheless, Yue Qingyuan starts the first aid attempts after activating what must be an emergency talisman.

How long would it take for someone to arrive all the way from Qian Cao? Even if someone flew all the way, Shen Yuan isn't sure if he can last long enough to make the trip back.

A bitter laugh erupts from his mouth alongside a bloodied cough. How exactly is Shen Yuan supposed to save his life when the System has doomed him by placing the checkpoint *after* he has already drank the poisoned tea? What else is he supposed to do when this fast-acting poison is eating away at his life faster than he can heal it?

This is so ridiculous, he thinks to himself, closing his eyes briefly as they start stinging. *So ridiculous, so unfair.*

His slowing heartbeat pounds loudly against his ears, drowning even the desperate questions coming from the head disciple. Shen Yuan wonders if death must always be this painfully quiet — lonely even when he is surrounded by people, all of whom cannot understand what he is truly going through.

A sigh comes out of his mouth, sounding more like a whimper than intended. A metallic taste floods his mouth as the air leaves it, so painfully familiar that it makes Shen Yuan certain that he will die once again.

I need to throw it up next time, Shen Yuan thinks as his conscience starts fading, washing away the desperate pleas of the head disciple holding him.

Shen Yuan's conscience comes back slowly and quietly, as if waking up from a hazy dream.

Opening his eyes to a familiar wooden ceiling, it takes a few seconds for Shen Yuan's brain to truly awaken. At first, the ceiling brings him some confusion — has Shen Yuan accidentally fallen asleep during his shift? No, Han-shijie would've slapped him before he could.

Then, it all floods into his mind — the quest, going to Qiong Ding, and drinking tea with Yue Qingyuan. In a panic, Shen Yuan jolts awake and looks around the room, noticing he is indeed in Qian Cao, this time in a patient bed and surrounded by monitoring talismans he often sees in the critical care ward.

Relief floods Shen Yuan's mind as he realizes he has somehow survived; it doesn't last for long, unfortunately, as the dormant pain from ingesting poison quickly overtakes his body.

The pain isn't as strong as compared to before, but it isn't something Shen Yuan can shrug off as he usually does. It feels similar to one time his liver decided that it had enough and tried to kill his whole digestive system by shutting down, but now with a dull ache in his throat every time he takes a breath, probably because the poison was very corrosive.

What really bothers right now Shen Yuan is how *tired* he feels. Without the rush of adrenaline that awoke him, his body feels as heavy as concrete, fighting against gravity to keep himself in an upright position so he can assess the situation better. Not only that, but Shen Yuan's

mind feels hazy and fatigued as his anxiety slowly dwindles away with the relief of being alive.

It isn't enough to wash away the anger flowing through his veins at the thought of going through what he did, but before Shen Yuan can call upon the System to curse at it, the previously closed door flings open, and a familiar figure rushes to his side.

"Shidi," Mu Qingfang calls out with short breath, as if he had ran all the way to the room. He opens his mouth and closes it as he notices Shen Yuan is sitting upright. "Shidi needs to lay down. Your injuries are too extensive for you to be overexerting yourself…"

It would be unfair to say Mu Qingfang is shoving him onto the bed, but it somewhat feels like that as he sternly guides Shen Yuan until his whole body touches the mattress. It makes Shen Yuan feel like a misbehaving child, and it makes him a little embarrassed, but it's not like he can do much about it — and not like he has the energy to, anyways.

Instead, he decides to ask about the situation. "What happened after I fainted…?"

Shen Yuan's voice sounds hoarser than he anticipated, which leaves him a bit surprised. Not only that, but the somber look in Mu Qingfang's eyes also leaves Shen Yuan puzzled.

"…Shen-shidi had severe internal bleeding, damage to the digestive track and liver. The tea shidi drunk has tested positive for poison, although it is unknown how and who put the poison in Yue-shixiong's quarters," the head disciple answers with a tinge of frustration in his voice, showcasing more emotion than Shen Yuan usually sees.

Nodding, Shen Yuan furrows his brows as he tries to think of someone who would want to poison Yue Qingyuan. As he is the head disciple of Qiong Ding and future sect leader, there must be many people willing to do it; Shen Yuan was just collateral damage and a victim of the classic poisoning plot that affects the heroine and makes them faint in their beloved's arms while coughing blood.

While it does make him irate to know his pain is nothing more than a plot point, Shen Yuan knows he must push this feeling away as much as possible to stay sane. In this moment, he's nothing but a character in a game, the protagonist that will undoubtedly go through some shit because the plot demands it; not Shen Yuan, the socially inept NEET stuck in a hospital bed for half of his life.

If he goes by clichés alone, it is usually the villainess who poisons the heroine's food/drink out of jealousy. However, Shen Yuan doesn't think this is the case here — the only character who would fit the role of 'villainess' is Shen Qingqiu, but the Qing Jing Head Disciple would never do something that would put Yue Qingyuan at risk too.

For all that Shen Qingqiu seems to loathe Yue Qingyuan, Shen Yuan knows he never once hurt the future sect leader, at least physically — in fact, Yue Qingyuan's death was what finally made Shen Qingqiu break in the Water Prison, the first and last thing that brought tears to his eyes even after losing all his limbs.

Since Shen Yuan has no enemies (that he knows of), he assumes it must've been a political plot to take Yue Qingyuan out, and Shen Yuan happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. If so, then Shen Yuan should have no reason to worry about being a target…

Sighing quietly, Shen Yuan nods, feeling himself calming down just a bit. "Is Yue-shixiong fine?"

Mu Qingfang nods. "Yue-shixiong did not ingest the poison, thankfully."

Shen Yuan feels strangely relieved. While he knows Yue Qingyuan cannot die due to being one of the male leads, he still enjoys the other's presence to a certain degree — when ignoring the weirdness that accompanies it —, and Shen Yuan now knows how much it *sucks* to be poisoned, so of course he doesn't want anyone to feel the same.

At least the damage is less than Shen Yuan would have anticipated; knowing his liver and digestive track were affected, it'll probably give him a few weeks of mild, constant pain, maybe even less considering this is in PIDW universe and he's basically the poor maiden who has a doctor crushing on them.

Who knows, maybe Mu Qingfang or Yue Qingyuan will show up tomorrow with a once-in-a-lifetime extremely rare plant that will solve Shen Yuan's issues; it would certainly be canon-compliant.

Looking towards the Qian Cao Head Disciple, Shen Yuan furrows his brows as he notices the other looks… off. He had not noticed at first due to the shock of waking up after a poisoning attempt, but Mu Qingfang looks extremely tired — pale skin, dark circles, slightly messy hair —, which contrasts starkly with what Shen Yuan is used to seeing.

"Is Mu-shixiong feeling alright?" Shen Yuan asks, worried about the other. It had been quite some time since they had seen each other, but Shen Yuan is sure Mu Qingfang wasn't looking so exhausted.

The head disciple's eyes widen in surprise at the question, not expecting the question. Mu Qingfang hesitates a bit before answering. "…It is nothing serious, this shixiong is just a tad tired. Shidi shouldn't worry about it."

Without any other option, Shen Yuan nods and drops the subject. The room turns silent as Mu Qingfang starts checking Shen Yuan's temperature and pulse, writing down the results with shaky hands — it is clear that the head disciple is extremely tired, to the point Shen Yuan feels like he should just relegate such trivial exams to any of their martial siblings instead of doing it himself.

Putting away the annotations, Mu Qingfang raises his head and smiles softly towards the other. "Shidi's vitals have improved significantly in these past hours," the head disciple says with relief, then takes a look at something inside his pouch and sighs. "This shixiong will have to leave now, but someone will be delivering some water and food for shidi in my stead... Also, if shidi feels any pain or discomfort, do not hesitate to call me."

“Thanking shixiong for the care,” Shen Yuan replies, also relieved that things are not as terrible as they could be. He hesitates for a few seconds before continuing. “…Also wishing shixiong can rest well.”

Another smile, albeit smaller, reaches the head disciple’s mouth as Shen Yuan speaks.

“I will,” he replies with a low tone of voice, almost as if unused to listening to such things.

With a quick farewell, the Qian Cao Head Disciple is gone and Shen Yuan is left alone in the quiet room. That is, if one does not count the System’s presence as soon as the door closes.

【 New achievement unlocked! — ‘Lessons on Toxicology’: die of poisoning while being a Qian Cao disciple. Reward: +10% poison resistance. 】

【 Health raised to level 2. Health Point increase: 10 -> 17 】

【 New achievement unlocked! — ‘Is this an Imperial Harem drama?’: survive a poisoning attempt. Reward: +1 Luck. 】

Breathing in and out in an attempt to not lash out at the screen in front of him, Shen Yuan quickly dismisses the System with a swipe of his hand. At the very least, he has gained something out of this mess; that poison resistance will undoubtedly be helpful in the future, if any situations like this arise again, and it’s always good to have some luck points.

From what he understands, he may have gained the extra health point after taking damage — or rather, dying —, as the same has happened when he woke up in this place, and he was ironically poisoned in that occasion too. Shen Yuan knows it would be ideal for him to gain a few more health points, but unfortunately it will be only one of many skills he absolutely needs to raise before the Immortal Alliance Conference.

A knock on the door brings Shen Yuan out of his thoughts, followed by utter surprise as the door opens and he sees both Han Lingyu and Wang Haoran walking in with a food tray.

“Shidi!” Wang Haoran exclaims, rushing to the side of the bed a bit too dramatically. Truthfully, his shixiong looks very worn-out, which makes Shen Yuan feel bad for him. “I’m so glad to see you! We really thought shidi was a goner-!”

A sudden jab in his ribs from Han Lingyu’s elbow is enough to make Wang Haoran stop talking. She smiles softly towards Shen Yuan, holding the tray in her hands carefully. “We are happy to see shidi awake. Is shidi feeling any pain or discomfort?”

“I’m also happy to see shixiong and shijie here,” Shen Yuan smiles back, albeit weaker than he intended due to his tiredness. “There’s a little bit of pain, but it could be worse.”

Placing the food and a bowl of medicine in the nightstand next to the bed, Han Lingyu nods to his words. “Shidi should drink some water, I’ll give you some pain medicine. Wang-shidi, please start mixing the second concoction.”

Wang Haoran quickly gets to works as Shen Yuan grimaces at the thought of drinking the awfully bitter and herbal medicine that he often prepared for patients, but nods nonetheless and lets Han Lingyu help him sit. From the patient's reactions, Qian Cao's medicine seems to work similarly to modern medicine — just in a nasty liquid form and not a pill.

Grabbing the cup in his hands, he takes his first gulp of water with relief, hoping to satiate his dry, itchy and painful throat. Unsurprisingly, the motion of swallowing feels like trying to move sharp rocks across his esophagus, making Shen Yuan cough reflexively, which only makes his throat hurt more.

It isn't comparable to a mere sore throat; honestly, not even the worst cold ever made his throat hurt that badly. It feels as if fire is moving alongside the water, burning all the flesh and making his muscles contract because of it. Han Lingyu helps Shen Yuan keep his grip on the cup steady while also holding her other hand against his back.

"It's enough," Han Lingyu says, taking away the cup and reaching for the medicine bowl. "As shidi likely knows, this will taste a tad bitter, but please bear with me."

Breathing deeply, Shen Yuan lets out a sigh and gulps down the concoction while trying his best not to smell it. If drinking water felt terrible, then drinking this mixture of miraculous herbs and ingredients feels like drinking acid. The coughing fit that comes right after swallowing cannot be stopped, as well as the tears in the corner of Shen Yuan's eyes.

"It should take about an incense stick's time for it to be effective," Han Lingyu says, taking away the empty bowl. "If shidi wishes, we can wait until shidi eats to give you the other medicine."

Taking a quick glance at the watery stew in the nightstand, Shen Yuan's stomach cramps in pain and a wave of nausea washes over him. Considering he had been unconscious, Shen Yuan assumes he hasn't eaten for a day or so, which would be enough reason for him to be so nauseous at the thought of eating.

"Unfortunately, this is the best we can offer shidi now," Wang Haoran chimes in after finishing mixing. "Don't worry, though, as soon as shidi's stomach gets better, this shixiong will bring those candies!"

With this new incentive, Shen Yuan finds the motivation to fight the nausea and withstand the best of Qian Cao's cuisine.

Taking the food bowl into his hands, Shen Yuan takes small sips of the blandest stew known to man. Somehow, it tastes like nothing with a pinch of rice and water. Of course, with his throat crying out for help and his nausea still there, Shen Yuan barely manages to take five sips before he's forced to place the bowl down.

"Shidi needn't force himself to eat," Han Lingyu says, handing the bowl of medicine made by Wang Haoran. Shen Yuan begrudgingly takes the bowl in his hands and tries not to smell the foul liquid. "It is normal to have difficulties after not eating for so long."

Furrowing his brows from both the disgusting taste of the medicine and confusion over his shijie's phrasing, Shen Yuan swallows the tonic with difficulty and lowers the bowl. "What does shijie mean by that?"

"Oh," Wang Haoran exclaims, looking confused as well. "Did Mu-dashixiong not mention it to you? Shidi fell into a coma after ingesting the poison."

Shen Yuan's eyes widen in surprise. No, Mu Qingfang had *not* mentioned that very important information at all! It would explain much of his soreness and the itching in his muscles; however, all things considered, Shen Yuan doesn't really feel like someone who just woke up from a long coma, so he assumes he slept for a day or two at most.

"Mu-shixiong did not say anything about it," Shen Yuan confirms.

"I guess it must have slipped through his mind," Han Lingyu mutters, hesitating a bit before continuing. "Although it is understandable, as dashixiong stayed awake during the whole time Shidi was asleep…"

A strange warmth spreads through Shen Yuan's heart and cheeks at his shijie's words. That would indeed explain why Mu Qingfang looked so tired, especially since he has yet to reach the Core Foundation stage of cultivation. Hopefully, the head disciple will heed to Shen Yuan's words and rest for a while.

Unsure of how to answer without making himself look more red than before, Shen Yuan masterfully changes subjects. "How… How long was I asleep for?"

Wang Haoran speaks up. "A whole week! Truly, this shixiong thought shidi was done for…"

The words coming out of Wang Haoran's mouth gradually become white noise in Shen Yuan's mind, and he stares blankly ahead. Was he asleep for a week? This cannot be the case, surely, because then it would mean that he has lost a whole seven days in the deadline for the inner disciple quest…

As if taunting his misfortune, the System chimes in.

【 'Become an Inner Disciple' remaining time for completion: 3 days, 9 hours, 23 minutes. 】

Shen Yuan reads the pop-up tab in front of him in disbelief, feeling the dread in his body grow as reality starts to sink in. How is he supposed to complete the task when he is in such a state…?

【 Due to User's circumstances, interaction with NPC 'Jiang Anhui, Qian Cao's Peak Lord' in event 'Bimestrial Outer Disciple Growth Evaluation' has been removed from the list of requirements for quest completion. Requirements left: Dexterity lvl 5, Intelligence lvl 4, Awareness lvl 2, 1 Special Skill. 】

He had not been aware of a 'Bimestrial Outer Disciple Growth Evaluation' existing in the first place, but at the very least Shen Yuan doesn't need to worry about it right now. Since his

skills are high enough, then he should only focus on mastering demon zoology — which he has 97% progress at the moment.

As he had calculated previously, it takes Shen Yuan roughly 24 hours of study to raise 2% of the progress. Therefore, if he studies 12 hours a day and spends his R-Points on the skill boost, Shen Yuan should be able to reach 100% in three days. His racing heart calms down a bit; Shen Yuan can't panic right now, he must study as hard as humanly possible and master the special skill soon so he doesn't need to worry about it anymore.

"…hear me? Shidi….?" Han Lingyu's worried voice echoes in his ears, waking Shen Yuan from the daze he had fallen into. "Wang-shixiong, please call…"

"I'm fine," Shen Yuan forces out, trying to smile in an attempt to make his shijie worry less. "I was just… a bit shocked by the news."

"Apologies, shidi, I should have worded it better," Wang Haoran quietly replies.

"It's fine," Shen Yuan absentmindedly says, thinking of a way to ask for his study materials without sounding weird. "How long will it take for me to be discharged?"

Han Lingyu takes a look at the medical records in her hands and lets out a sigh. "It is difficult to say, but this shijie thinks it will take another week or so until Shen-shidi is discharged."

Humming in acknowledgment, Shen Yuan finally figures out what to use as an excuse. "Then, if it isn't much to ask… Is it possible for shijie or shixiong to bring me the books on top of my desk at the dormitory?"

Both Han Lingyu and Wang Haoran nod to the request, promising Shen Yuan to bring them as soon as possible. With his mission now accomplished, Shen Yuan focuses his strength on finishing his stew and waiting for the pain medicine to take effect — after all, he will have to somehow manage 12 hours of study while his body tries to kill him.

Trying with all his might to swallow the bland stew, Shen Yuan anxiously waits for his books to arrive.

A day has passed since Han Lingyu brought him the requested study materials, and Shen Yuan now knows this will be harder than he anticipated.

While yes, he had the unfortunate experience of studying while his body tries to kill him before, Shen Yuan must admit this feels worse than his usual flare-ups that left him bedridden for days. Once the shock of waking up and finding out he had been in a coma had lessened, the reason why his martial siblings had been worried about his condition became clearer.

The fatigue never went away, unsurprisingly — his digestive system had taken such a hit that Shen Yuan doubts he's absorbing half of whatever he manages to ingest —, but it was one of his lesser issues; what really made it impossible to focus on studying for more than a few minutes at a time turned out to be the pain and weakness that followed.

Sitting upright on the bed is difficult, let alone get out of bed. Whenever Shen Yuan felt bold enough to attempt, it felt as if his body refused to follow his commands, like his limbs are attached to huge weights that won't budge. Walking is impossible without assistance, as his stomach unleashes the most vile pain that feels like his skin is being tore apart with the slightest movement.

That is not to say he gave up on studying — of course not, especially when the result of failing is a 'punishment', and Shen Yuan really doesn't want to find out what exactly that entails. Han Lingyu brought him his books as promised, and so started Shen Yuan's attempts to master demonic biology.

The first few pages weren't as bad as they could be — Shen Yuan has experience reading even while fatigued, and he already knows how to curb his frustration before it grows —, and with enough R-Points to buy himself three skill boosts, Shen Yuan assumed it would be, at most, mildly inconvenient.

By the first hour, Shen Yuan had caught himself rereading sentences more often than not.

Of course, just that wouldn't be enough to throw him off — Shen Yuan simply paused for a minute or two, forced himself to drink some water, then went back to the book. Yet, no matter how often he paused to drink or rest his eyes, it felt as if the fog in his mind simply refused to accept the information, growing more and more numbing with each hour that passed.

Night quickly arrived, and with it came reality — Shen Yuan hadn't even managed to raise his skill by 2%, even when using the skill boost, only reaching a measly 97.9%. Chen Xi, who had been assigned to give him medicine, seemed mildly worried about the frustration and anxiety in his face, but refrained from saying anything.

At some point, the fatigue won and Shen Yuan fell asleep, book in hand and all. Once he woke up, Shen Yuan felt refreshed enough to wonder if maybe yesterday was just a bad day and he's now back in shape.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the case. By midday, the aches were all but the same as the day before, and his mind still felt foggy; nevertheless, Shen Yuan continued reading in hopes of somehow learning something.

It is only when the door opens that Shen Yuan looks up from the book, meeting Mu Qingfang's worried gaze as he silently walks into the room with a tray in hand. While Shen Yuan wishes he could continue studying, he also knows that ignoring one of the male leads is not an option, and that socializing for a few minutes could help him rest in order to focus better.

"Shen-shidi," he greets, sounding better than when Shen Yuan had woken up — and looking much better, too. The head disciple leaves the wooden tray on top of the table and then turns to face the other. "How is shidi feeling today?"

"…Alright, I guess," Shen Yuan replies automatically, not bothering to complain about his tiredness — and considering he ingested xianxia poison meant to kill Yue Qingyuan, future strongest person in the Jianghu, he could be feeling way worse. If anything, it would be better

not to complain as to not bring suspicion upon the fact he's desperately reading demon biology books. "This shidi is glad that shixiong looks well today, too."

A small smile makes its way to the head disciple's face. "This shixiong has heeded to shidi's words. Unfortunately, lack of sleep is not so unusual for this position."

Shen Yuan does not doubt the head disciple's words, but it does make his heart a little heavy with guilt to know Mu Qingfang stayed awake for a whole week because of him. "Nevertheless, shixiong should prioritize his health more often..."

【 Mu Qingfang feels happy listening to User's words. +5 Affection Points added to 'Qian Cao's Head Disciple, Mu Qingfang'. 】

"I'll try," the head disciple quietly replies, looking flustered like a child who had been scolded, and quickly changes the subject. "…Are those demonology books?"

Being caught slightly off-guard by the question, Shen Yuan hesitates for a second before nodding. He should've expected people would find it weird to study while being stuck on a hospital bed. "Yes, this shidi has asked Han-shijie to bring some books as it can be quite boring to lay down all day…"

"If shidi wishes, I can borrow a few novels from Chen-shimei…" Mu Qingfang offers, most likely thinking Han Lingyu brought whatever she managed to find in Shen Yuan's room.

"Thanking shixiong for the offer, but it is not necessary," Shen Yuan politely declines, sighing internally as he would much rather read any novels than to study when his body feels so weak.

Unfortunately, he does not have a choice at the moment, as he absolutely does not want to find out whatever the 'punishment' mentioned by the System is.

Mu Qingfang does not insist further, instead opting to hand out the medicine as the conversation naturally slows down. If he thinks Shen Yuan is weird for studying right now, he does not show it on his face — and neither does the System chime in with a notification.

As the conversation dies down after his refusal, it does not take long for the head disciple to leave after giving Shen Yuan his meds. While it felt a bit strange to insist so strongly on this, Shen Yuan knows this is the only way he can complete the task without fail.

He reads over and over again, managing to raise the skill to 98.8% by the time his body refuses to stay awake for any longer.

Upon waking up around midday, Shen Yuan checks the time left. 12 hours and 23 minutes until the task expires, according to the System. With his calculations, if he manages to maintain yesterday's performance, Shen Yuan should be able to reach 100% with the two skill boosts he has available.

Without bothering to wait for lunch, Shen Yuan immediately starts studying without pause. His second skill boost is used in the first hour after waking up, as his body is less achy than

usual and he feels more energized; the third one will be kept in case of emergency, if Shen Yuan does not manage to reach 100% by around 9pm.

The first few hours go by surprisingly productive. Shen Yuan eats his lunch while reading, feels less worse than usual and even manages to take his first meds of the day without gagging, and raises his skill to 99.3%. Feeling motivated enough to shake off some of the anxiety, Shen Yuan focuses even harder on finishing the damn task.

At some point during late afternoon, Han Lingyu enters his room. Shen Yuan can't recall what they talked about, but was mildly aware that his shijie looked worried — and if he wasn't in such a hurry, he would have tried to mask his unhealthy study session as to not worry anyone unnecessarily. Nevertheless, it must have looked disturbing to Han Lingyu, who undoubtedly tattled to Mu Qingfang, which Shen Yuan wouldn't have known if not for the System notification that popped up and startled him.

【 Mu Qingfang is deeply worried about User's mental stability. Special attribute 'Care' increased to 13%. +10 Affection Points. 】

Glancing for a few seconds at the bright screen, Shen Yuan sighs and continues to read the book. It's not as if he has the time to worry about what Mu Qingfang thinks of his mental health, he can do his best to ease any worries after he successfully finishes this task.

Time goes by quicker than Shen Yuan wants, and once he checks the System to see the time and his progress by the nth time, he realizes it's already 9pm, and he's currently at 99.7%. Without hesitation, Shen Yuan buys the skill boost and breathes in deeply before starting the final binge. His head hurts like hell, his stomach is pulsating with a soft ache only dulled by the painkillers given to him an hour prior, and his eyes really wish for some peace and quiet.

Nevertheless, Shen Yuan restlessly continues to study, desperately reading and rereading paragraphs, analyzing anatomical drawings over and over again.

By 10pm, he's up to 99.8%. Barely taking any time to revel in the relief, Shen Yuan continues to push himself regardless of his tired eyes, knowing the time frame left for him to succeed is very slim, but possible to reach. Knowing his heart rate is accelerated and it might activate the talisman attached to him if it gets any higher, Shen Yuan utilizes the same methods taught to him to remove it without triggering an alarm.

11pm arrives, and with it the desperation of being so close to the time limit hits Shen Yuan. He's still stuck at 99.8%, which wasn't what he expected — he's reading just as he did an hour ago, so why is it still the same? Ignoring his erratic heart beat and trembling hands, Shen Yuan continues to study.

11:30pm is when he reaches 99.9%. Shen Yuan spares no time on the achievement once again, relentlessly scouring pages for more information he does not yet know. The skill boost will be active up until midnight, so he has no worries regarding that. The only thing Shen Yuan can do now is continue to push himself and his body further than he has ever done.

11:40pm, still at 99,9%. Shen Yuan tries to think positively, that 0,1% might be just around the corner. Ignoring the searing pain in his abdomen, he continues to read.

11:50pm and he has not reached 100% yet. Shen Yuan refuses to accept this reality — no, he's just unlucky enough to hit 100% at the last minute possible. If he keeps reading over and over again, then it will happen.

11:55pm, Shen Yuan's ears ring and his head feels dizzy. Regardless of reason, he ignores it and tightens his hold on the book in his hands.

11:58pm is when Shen Yuan finally accepts reality, laughing bitterly to himself as sweat and tears roll down his face. This is so unfair, so stupid, how was he supposed to know he would spend a week in a coma? If he had known it beforehand, then Shen Yuan wouldn't have accepted Wang Haoran's request, and he wouldn't have drank that tea. Regardless, he keeps on reading, holding onto that faint glimmer of hope that *maybe, just maybe* he really is unlucky enough to get 100% right before the timer's up.

11:59pm, Shen Yuan knows this is now an impossible task to accomplish. He spends the remaining seconds before midnight cursing the System as he flips through the pages in a desperate rage. Why bother giving him an impossible task to accomplish in such little time when he is physically incapable of?

Exactly when midnight strikes, the dreaded ping from the System echoes through Shen Yuan's head, exacerbating his headache and making him burn with pure anger as he reads the notification.

【 WARNING: Task 'Become an Inner Disciple' has expired due to time restrictions. Initiating Punishment protocol shortly. 】

Whatever, Shen Yuan thinks, feeling the pressure in his head increasing as his vision becomes blurrier. *This is just a stupid game,* he repeats to himself as his vision gradually darkens and he falls into unconsciousness.

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